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**Why Are the Stayers staying with “No Excuses” Charter Management  
Organizations (CMOs)? A qualitative study on teacher retention at “No  
Excuses” CMOs**

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**Why are the Stayers staying with “No Excuses” Charter Management Organizations (CMOs)? A qualitative study on teacher retention at “No Excuses” CMOs**

**by**

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**Dissertation**

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## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to my wife Lenora, thank you for making this journey possible, here is to 100 years together. To my children, Gideon, Gloria, and Gabriel, may you always be courageous, stand upright and be strong, and may you stay forever young. And to my Mom, Dr. Deborah Peters Goessling, who taught me to have big academic dreams and the perseverance needed to pursue them. I miss you.

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I don't think I could have asked for a better chair, she even pushed me to take some breaks and play soccer. Thank you Dr. Holme for your encouragement and belief in me.

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light up my life. Your impromptu hugs and smiles made Daddy's weekend writing time that much better. Here is to the next big goal whatever that may be.



## **Abstract**

### **Why are the Stayers staying with “No Excuses” Charter Management Organizations (CMOs)? A qualitative study on teacher retention at “No Excuses” CMOs**

Samuel James Goessling, PhD

The University of Texas at Austin, 2018

Supervisor: Jennifer Jellison Holme

Teacher retention at “No Excuses” Charter Management Organizations (NECMOs) lags behind traditional and public charter schools. This study focused on three NECMO schools in a Texas urban area with higher than normal teacher retention rates. Nine teacher “stayers” with at least three years of experience at their specific school were interviewed as well as six administrators. Key findings were that teacher stayers at these schools made their decision to stay or leave their school based on the quality of their direct managers, e.g. assistant principal, the caliber of their relationship with their colleagues on their teaching team, the short- and long-term relationships they developed with students, opportunities to engage in leadership roles, and their commute to work. Policy implications include a focus on these social constructs over other teacher retention initiatives and a review of the effectiveness of Teacher Career Pathway programs on teacher retention.

*Keywords:* teacher retention, charter schools, “no excuses,” Charter Management Organizations, teacher stayer

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## **Foreword**

[The teachers] knew that equity and excellence could be achieved through cooperation... and that it was the responsibility of the teachers to unlock the mysteries of motivation. They believed that all kids could reach their academic social and physical potential if the teachers worked hard enough to discover the individuality of the students. They believed that pathologies existed but that the greatest disability was seeing the pathology before seeing the person. (D. Goessling, 1994, p. 110)

When I was a middle and high school NECMO principal, I was convinced that the key to teacher retention was to provide teachers with a schedule that accommodated their needs for planning, parent phone calls, and grading. This study leads me to believe that I was wrong. As a teacher, I had strong relationships with my students, but they often only lasted for a year, as my 5<sup>th</sup> graders moved across the district to middle school each year. As a teacher I struggled to build deep lasting relationships with my teaching peers given the churn in my school. As a principal I managed the majority of teachers in the school's first year and did a mediocre job of coaching and managing the middle managers in the second year, a group that this study shows are so important for teacher retention. In short, I would have benefited from the information in this study as a principal and would have likely been a better school leader for it. It is my hope that current and future school principals at both public charter schools and traditional public schools may benefit from this research and improve their practices around teacher retention. Our students deserve nothing less.

## **Chapter 1: Purpose and Rationale**

The first charter school in the United States was founded in Minnesota in 1991, since that date the number of charter schools nationwide has continued to expand annually. While just 2.7% of all public schools were classified as charters during the 2002-2003 school year, the sector grew by 6.7% over the past decade to where 6.3% of all schools were charter schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016). According to 2016 data from the National Center for Public Charter Schools there are now more than 7,000 charter schools across the country serving nearly 3.2 million students.<sup>1</sup> 640 of these schools were new schools opening in the 2016-2017 school year, the most recent year in which data has been collected across all charter schools and networks. The opening of these additional schools represents a 7.3% annual growth rate, (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2013), a growth rate larger than the increase over the past decade, and one that according to recent trends appears to be increasing annually (Mead, Libetti, & Rotherham, 2015).

Charter schools exist in a variety of compositions and sizes ranging from a single school or a “Mom and Pop” charter school to larger networks of for-profit and non-profit schools. For-profit charter schools represent 20% of the total charter sector (Stizlein, 2013), with nonprofit schools representing the other 80% of all charter schools, although the balance has been slowly increasing in favor of the nonprofits since 2006 (Miron & Applegate, 2010).

Regardless of whether charters have a for-profit or non-profit status, one growing problem recognized within the sector is teacher turnover and retention. Nationally charter school retention lags behind traditional public-school retention (Keigher, 2010; Stuit &

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.publiccharters.org/>



Smith, 2009). In Texas, charter school teachers are more than twice as likely to leave their school as their traditional public school (TPS) teaching peers (Sass, Flores, Claeys, & Pérez, 2012). Teachers in Texas rarely remain at public charter schools (PCSs) for more than four years, (Sass et al., 2012), and at “No Excuses” Charter Management Organizations (NECMOs) across the country the number is even lower with retention rates closer to two years (Furgeson et al., 2011; Merseth, 2009; Tuttle, Gill, Gleason, & Knechtel, 2013; Lake, Dusseault, Bowen, Demeritt, & Hill, 2010; Yeh, 2013). The current research includes multiple reasons for teacher departure from a specific campus (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Johnson et al., 2004; Shen, 1997) and from the teaching profession in general (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009; Ingersoll, 2001).

Some researchers attribute the high levels of attrition at charter schools to the pressure of high stakes testing on teacher stress (Tye & O’Brien, 2002), or the effects of poverty on the school environment (Kirby, Berends, & Naftel, 1999). Other researchers have noted that teacher autonomy (Scott & Dimartino, 2011) and workload (Ash, 2013; Woodworth et al., 2008), negatively impact charter school teacher retention. Despite this research, there are very few studies about why teachers in Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) decide to stay, and how teacher retention initiatives of CMOs affect those decisions. This knowledge is important in the field of teacher retention because understanding factors that cause teachers to decide to stay within the low retention environments of NECMOs may also prove to have staying power in traditional public schools with generally higher teacher retention rates. Improving the rates of teacher retention, even if done incrementally matters as student achievement increases when staff, and in turn the culture of a campus remain constant (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Kersaint, Lewis, Potter, & Meisels, 2007).

The purpose of this research is to determine what decision to stay rationales exist among the “stayers” or those teachers who have persisted with NECMOs and how these patterns may or may not have been influenced by district level initiatives that may be replicated at scale within PCSs and traditional public schools TPSs.

In this chapter I discuss the history, educational context and theory behind NECMOs and some existing theories on the causes of low NECMO teacher retention. I argue that teacher retention is important to understand at NECMOs because of the same reasons that teacher retention is a concern in traditional schools, e.g. departing teachers negatively impacting student efficacy and school culture (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012; Guin, 2004; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). I also note that NECMO teacher retention is worth studying for reasons more specific to NECMOs such as the large number of minority students they serve and the considerable philanthropic support they receive. I close the chapter by making the case that it is worth reviewing and comparing teacher impressions and reactions, i.e. stay or leave, to district level NECMO initiatives within a regional context. This will be a qualitative multi-case study of NECMO teacher reactions to NECMO level initiatives including explicit teacher retention initiatives, and will provide policy makers and district and school level leaders with information to improve teacher retention in order to build strong and enduring schools.

## **TEACHER RETENTION ACROSS TRADITIONAL, CHARTER, AND NO EXCUSES CHARTER SCHOOLS**

In comparison to TPSs, PCSs have had consistently lower annual teacher retention (Newton, Rivero, Fuller, & Dauter, 2011; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Multiple studies have shown that charter school teachers within a variety of demographics including race, (Miron & Applegate, 2007), and years of experience (Renzulli, Parrott, & Beattie, 2011), are likely

to remain on the staff of their charter school for fewer than four years (Sass et al., 2012), before transferring or leaving the profession entirely. This has proven to be particularly true for young novice teachers who begin their careers with charter schools and those teachers with minimal experience (Miron & Applegate, 2007).

Teacher retention is an even more challenging problem for CMOs than PCSs. CMOs are either for-profit or non-profit networks of charter schools organized with a central governing body that usually has decision rights for policies and practices that are implemented across the school network. Some CMOs are explicitly focused on supporting at risk youth, and others are magnet schools attracting a region's top students in a specific concentration or focus such as STEM education. Most research shows that CMOs have lower levels of teacher retention than non CMO charter schools (Renzulli et al., 2011; Newton et al., 2011). As of the most recent national Charter School Alliance data for the 2013-2014 school year, 21% of all charter schools in the US were part of a CMO, up from an 11.5% portion of the sector in 2000<sup>2</sup>. CMO's often recruit teachers who are younger and less experienced which some researchers believe contributes to their lower teacher retention rates (Carruthers, 2012).

Within the CMO portion of the charter school movement is an even more narrowly defined group of charter schools. These schools are sometimes defined as “college preparatory” or “No Excuses” charter schools (Dobbie & Fryer Jr., 2011) or when affiliated with CMOs, NECMOs. These schools are identifiable by their similar mission statements of improving academic outcomes for students from low-income backgrounds, their focus on college acceptance and completion, and their rapid growth in recent years. For the purposes of this document I have used the term NECMOs to describe these schools in the

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<sup>2</sup> <http://dashboard2.publiccharters.org/National/>

interest of historical consistency with other education research which has also used the terminology “no excuses” to describe these schools. However, it should be noted that the “no excuses” moniker is no longer actively used by many of these schools and that some schools that previously embraced the expression no longer tout the expression, nor utilize “no excuses” phrasing in their marketing materials. While conducting this research I did not observe an emphasis on the phrase “no excuses,” but did see a strong emphasis on the importance of preparing for college as will be noted in chapters four through six.

NECMOs have increased scale in the past ten years as both the total number of NECMO districts and total number of schools within these districts has continued to grow (Hassel, Hassel, & Ableidinger, 2011). Within individual NECMO school districts, many schools are being added. No excuses schools such as the Noble Network of schools in Chicago, IDEA Public Schools in southern Texas, and the Achievement First Network in New York are all growing their networks through at least 2017.<sup>3</sup> NECMOs have increased in scale while also having some of the lowest rates of teacher retention across the charter and traditional public schools sector (Sawchuk, 2015; Wilder & Jacobsen, 2010; Yeh, 2013). In other words, overall charter school retention lags behind traditional public school teacher retention, CMO teacher retention lags behind both traditional and overall charter retention, and NECMO teacher retention lags behind CMO teacher retention.

### **Teacher Retention Is Important for All Types of Schools**

Research has shown that there has been a relatively consistent shortage of teachers over the past forty years particularly in urban areas (Sedlak & Schlossman, 1986; Darling-Hammond, 2000), including a recent acute shortage in science, technology, engineering

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.achievementfirst.org/our-approach/achievement-gap-and-mission/>,  
<http://www.ideapublicschools.org/our-story/expansion-growth>; <http://www.noblenetwork.org/>

and math (STEM) teachers (Hutchison, 2012; Ingersoll & Perda, 2010). However a shortage of teachers has not been the sole reason for the struggles of schools to staff their rosters. The key issue affecting schools, particularly schools serving populations of low-income minority students has been the ongoing departure of teachers from these schools (Ingersoll, 2001, 2003; Tye & O'Brien, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006). This “churn” of teachers impacts instruction in multiple ways but particularly in student learning or achievement. Dr. Susan Moore Johnson, a leader in the field of teacher retention, recently completed a study with colleagues comparing student achievement results and teacher retention data. In this study Dr. Johnson and her colleagues noted the impact of teacher departure on student achievement writing:

Schools and students pay a price when early-career teachers leave their high-need schools after two or three years, just when they have acquired valuable teaching experience. It becomes impossible for schools with ongoing turnover to build instructional capacity and to ensure that students in all classrooms have effective teachers. Also, persistent turnover in a school's teaching staff disrupts efforts to build a strong organizational culture, making it difficult to develop and sustain coordinated instructional programs throughout the school. (Johnson et al, 2012)

The organizational culture referenced by the authors is important because it is this culture that dictates the level of comfort and satisfaction that teachers have with their workplace and whether they choose to leave that workplace. Recent research has also shown that much of the workplaces that teachers choose to leave are those that serve predominantly minority and low-income students (Boyd, Grossman, Ing, & Lankford, 2011; Ladd, 2009 & 2011; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). When teachers choose to leave these schools their students suffer multiple consequences including: a faculty that does not maintain close relationships (Guin, 2004), and lower achievement as measured by results on state math and reading exams, (Holme & Rangel, 2012; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002)

These results disproportionately impact students from low-income backgrounds and minorities, as these are the students who attend schools that offer the working conditions least conducive to teacher retention. These students are also the ones who are most often served at NECMOs putting the need for improved retention at NECMOs in direct alignment with the need for improved teacher retention at schools serving low income and minority students.

### **Why retention is important at NECMOs; NECMO Demographics & NECMO Philanthropy**

Teacher retention is particularly important to study at NECMOs because of two factors: the high numbers of low income and minority students attending NECMO schools, and the large amounts of capital being invested in the NECMO model by both private and public sources. In comparison to traditional public schools, and non “no excuses” charter schools, NECMOs educate a much higher percentage of students from low income or minority backgrounds and receive a much greater percentage of public competitive grants and private philanthropy than their non NECMO counterparts.

### ***No Excuses Charter School Demographics***

Whether one believes in the efficacy of NECMOs and their academic results or not, the data show that charter schools and in particular CMOs and NECMOs are educating large numbers of students from low income backgrounds and minority students. These schools are therefore important to study as they represent a growing proportion of American students who are often impoverished minorities who are expecting a similar level of education as all Americans. Teacher retention should be studied at these schools because the work of educating low income and minority students is imperative in order to close the achievement gap between wealthy and poor students. In addition to creating an improved

school culture and increasing academic performance associated with teacher longevity (Birkeland & Curtis, 2006; Donaldson, 2012; Neild, Useem, Travers, & Lesnick, 2003), teacher retention has lately been seen as a key lever that will ultimately increase student achievement results longitudinally (Barnett & Hudgens, 2014; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013).

Student populations are not only increasing at CMOs, they are also more likely to be composed of students from racial minority groups and/ or low income backgrounds than traditional public schools. A 2012 Mathematica study found that on average, 91 percent of students in a school operated by a CMO are black or Hispanic and that 71 percent are students from low income backgrounds (Furgeson, Gill, Haimson, Killewald, McCullough, Nichols-Barrer, & Lake, 2012). These numbers are dramatically different than demographic data for all U.S. public schools (including public charter schools such as NECMOs) where 21% of students are considered to be low income and 40% come from African American (16%) or Latino Hispanic (24%) backgrounds.<sup>4</sup>

### ***No Excuses Charter School Funding Streams***

Teacher retention at NECMO's merits study because many private and public funders, including the U.S. Department of Education, have supported their growth with considerable funding. Advocates for NECMO funding and expansion have made their voices heard in the national media and political agenda as evidenced by a broad network of philanthropic, and government supporters. It is estimated that by 2019 CMOs will have received more than half a billion dollars in private philanthropy (Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farrell, 2013). NECMOs are a prominent component of the CMO funding portfolio for investors. For instance, the Charter School Growth fund, a large funder of CMOs growth

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<sup>4</sup> [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cge.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cge.asp)

which has contributed more than \$300 million to NECMOs lists “No Excuses” as an explicit tenant it looks for when funding schools, stating on its website, “The rise of high-performing CMOs represents one of the most promising developments in K-12 [education]” (<http://chartergrowthfund.org/what-we-do/investing-in-cmos/>).

Both the recent Bush and Obama administrations have also supported growth of NECMOs via government grant competitions. The most recent of these competitions, the Charter Schools Program Replication and Expansion Grants program, has awarded more than \$120 million in funding to NECMOs since its inception in 2010 (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/charter-rehqcs/index.html>).

NECMOs focused on sending students from low-income backgrounds to and through college have been able to raise considerable funding while still failing to retain their key employees and teachers at rates that would satisfy most investors. For the sums of philanthropy and government grants provided to NECMO’s a greater focus on teacher retention could be expected, yet teacher retention does not seem to be a top priority for funders as evidenced by the lack of retention data requested in federal charter school grants and a majority focus on student achievement results by private funders. The teacher retention gap between NECMOs and traditional school districts in spite of a conspicuous philanthropic/ grant funding advantage is therefore worth studying.

### **Causes for Leavers & Stayers at NECMO schools**

Although teacher retention rates have recently been declining across all types of public school systems (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012; Shockley, Guglielmino, & Watlington, 2006), there continues to be a difference between the teacher retention at TPSs and NECMOs. In Texas this difference has been particularly pronounced with four of the largest NECMOs in the state all having teacher retention rates at least 15% lower than the



state average<sup>5</sup>. It is clear that as a sector Texas CMOs lag behind their traditional school district peers in retaining teachers year to year. This retention rate for Texas differs from recent national data from the U.S. Dept. of Education. This study finds that the gap between traditional public schools and charter school teacher retention is actually narrowing (Sawchuck, 2015). The teacher turnover rate at traditional public schools has remained constant at about 15% annually, while the turnover rate at charter schools has declined from 24% to 18%<sup>6</sup>. Charter schools continue to experience decreased teacher retention, but the gap between traditional public schools and charter schools is narrowing.

Despite the clear gap between NECMO teacher retention and the state average for teacher retention in Texas, and what appears to be a decreasing retention gap for charter schools nationally, there has been very little research done as to why a disparity exists between TPS and NECMO teacher retention, nor what factors may be influencing improved retention within the public charter school sector. Some researchers have posited that teacher retention at CMOs- many of which are located in urban low income areas- is lower because CMOs serve more students from low income backgrounds<sup>7</sup> and schools serving students from low income backgrounds have twice the level of teacher attrition as those schools serving wealthier populations of students (Ingersoll, 2002, 2011; Marinell & Coca, 2013). Some speculate it is the organizational culture of no excuses schools- which place demands on teachers that are not consistently present in TPSs and include the mantra of “No Excuses” for the adults as well as the students. (Ash, 2013; Woodworth et al., 2008; Torres, 2014). Recent research into the causes of teacher departure from NECMOs focuses

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<sup>5</sup> <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/tapr/2014/srch.html?srch=D>

<sup>6</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/overview.asp>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/~media/publications/PDFs/education/cmo\\_final\\_updated.pdf](http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/~media/publications/PDFs/education/cmo_final_updated.pdf)

on the lack of autonomy afforded teachers due to campus wide discipline systems (Torres, 2015).

The recent research on the increased teacher retention across the charter sector could be attributed to improvements within the previously noted causes of teacher departure at NECMOs. It could also be attributed to increased efforts by charter school district and campus leadership to increase their retention through proactive measures. In the end it is unclear why the gap exists between traditional public schools and public charter schools nor is it clear what practices at the district level have recently led to an increase in charter school teacher retention. We need to more closely observe NECMO teachers who choose to remain with their school and ascertain their rationale for staying. It is also important for future research to compare response patterns by NECMO teachers regarding district initiatives or actions that they have noted in their decision-making process, which led them to stay with their school. This study will aim to do each of these things.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the reasons why teachers at NECMO charter schools decide to return to their classroom. To date there have been few studies that examine why teachers leave NECMOs; and even fewer that examine why they stay with them. Thus, a primary purpose of this study is to compare patterns in teacher responses for staying teachers' specific rationale for remaining in their teaching positions. A comparison will also be made between the responses of teachers between NECMO school districts to determine if patterns exist within teacher groups from specific NECMO school districts.

I reviewed responses from teachers at multiple NECMOs in a consistent urban geographic area in order to determine if NECMO school district-initiated policies contribute to NECMO teachers' decision making. Examples of district initiated policies at

NECMOs designed to influence teacher retention include Teacher Career Pathway systems, salary structure, professional development opportunities, and strategic stipends. There have been few studies done on NECMO school district-based teacher retention practices within the same community. Upon review it became clear that certain district practices that initially appeared unique to some of the charter networks were similar to practices and policies at nearby NECMOs. It is also became clear that district and school leaders within one NECMO were unaware of similar teacher retention programming occurring at a NECMO nearby. These findings are noted among others in chapter seven.

Charters have often been expected to serve as “R&D arms” within public education (Lubienski, 2004). It is possible that some of the NECMO policies and practices from this study that contribute to teachers staying with NECMOs may be useful for non NECMO districts, thereby supporting a greater number of students.

In order to best understand teachers’ decisions to stay, and their responses to district-based retention programs and practices, I interviewed teachers and district leaders across three Texas NECMOs, all with schools in the same large urban location. These three networks were ideal to study given the relatively similar demographics of each district, the size of the districts and the number of students at each school. Each network had at least four schools within the urban area with the largest NECMO having nine schools. Each of the networks also had student populations with at least 50% of the students coming from low-income backgrounds. See Table 1 for a comparison of each of the NECMOs in this study.

Table 1: *Participating NECMOs, Student Demographic Data*

| <u>NECMO</u>                   | <u>Annual<br/>Teacher<br/>Turnover</u> | <u># of<br/>students<br/>enrolled</u> | <u>%<br/>Students<br/>At Risk</u> | <u>%<br/>Students<br/>Latino/<br/>Hispanic</u> | <u>%<br/>Students<br/>African<br/>American</u> | <u>% Student<br/>s Econ Dis</u> |
|--------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|--|---------------------------------|
| State of Texas                 | 16.4%                                  | 5.3M                                  | 50.3%                             | 52.4%  | 12.6%  | 59.0%                           |
| Eagle Public Schools (State)   | 23.4%                                  | 29,000 (State)                        | 49.4%                             | 93.6%  | 2.6%   | 89.1%                           |
| Queen Public Schools (Region)  | 30.2%                                  | 5,000 (region)                        | 64%                               | 92.8%  | 3.7%   | 88%                             |
| Taylor Public Schools (Region) | 31.0%                                  | 4,000                                 | 56.6%                             | 53.6%  | 11.1%  | 58.1%                           |

*Source: Texas Education Agency, 2016-2017 TAPR report*

These NECMOs were also ideal for this work due to their high teacher retention rates an anomaly in comparison to state averages for TPSs and PCSs. Each of these schools had teacher retention rates greater than 89% with the top school having a rate of 95%. These high rates of retention were important as these schools represented NECMO outliers for teacher retention and thus ideal places to determine why stayers are choosing to stay. Each of the NECMOs in the study was also actively working to improve teacher retention at the district level. For example, Angel College Preparatory within the Eagle CMO and Lion College Preparatory within the Queen CMO have both created teacher career pathways (TCPs) that provide monetary and professional development incentives for

teachers placed on its higher levels. The third NECMO in the study Parker Academy, part of the Taylor CMO is also working on a variety of retention initiatives including increased salaries and other financial incentives. These NECMO teacher retention initiatives will present a unique opportunity to study the efforts of a variety of NECMO practices through the lens of multiple teachers and leaders within each district; all of which took place in the same city. Finally, the time was right for this study given the acknowledgement of both district leadership and the teachers themselves that retention was an Achilles Heel for each NECMO. Both teachers and district leaders recognized that student performance would increase if teachers would remain with their respective organizations and thus they were interested in changing the status quo.

### **Research Design and Chapter Overview**

This research was designed to better understand what factors led NEMCO teachers to choose to stay with the NECMO district. An assumption of this research is that with a greater understanding of teacher response patterns to certain district level programs or practices, that inferences can then be made as to which district practices may positively change teachers' decision to remain with their school.

This study addressed the following two research questions (which are covered in greater detail in Chapter Three):

1. How do teachers make meaning of their decisions to stay in their teaching position at NECMO charter schools?
2. How do teachers make sense of district level NECMO retention initiatives in their decision to stay teaching at their school?

To address these questions, I interviewed teachers and their campus principal as well as a NECMO school district level leader focused on increasing teacher retention. I

completed each of these interviews at three different school sites. Although the focus of the study was on the teacher perspectives it was important to interview those responsible for initiating the various programs that are expected to influence teacher retention in order to better understand the local context for teacher meaning making within each case study.

In the next chapter I will review the literature on teacher retention, and in particular the literature around teacher retention at CMOs and NECMOs. In this chapter I also review employee retention rates outside of the realm of education. In chapter three I describe research methods for the study including the interview protocols, interview schedules, and qualitative research techniques utilized. Chapters four, five, and six represent findings from each of the individual case studies. In chapter seven I discuss findings from a cross case study analysis of each of the three case study schools and my recommendations for future research and policy implementation for policy makers, district leaders and school principals.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Recent research has made clear that the teacher in front of students has the most powerful impact on the learning or student achievement of those students (Hanushek, Kain, Markman, & Rivkin, 2003; Rowan, Correnti, & Miller, 2002). Variance in teaching quality therefore leads to varied student outcomes, with the strongest teachers predictably having the greatest positive effect on student performance (Hanushek, 1992). It therefore follows that retaining teachers who consistently deliver a high level of instruction to their pupils is critical for schools and school districts to achieve a consistent level of student learning. However, many schools districts have consistently struggled to retain their strongest teachers, especially in schools serving students from low income backgrounds, schools in rural and urban areas, and schools serving predominantly students of color (Borman & Kimball, 2005; Kain & Singleton, 1996). As noted in chapter one, public charter schools (PCSs) as a sector have also struggled with retaining teachers, with an 11% differential in teacher turnover as compared to traditional public schools (TPSs) (Stuit & Smith, 2012). This challenge is likely due to those issues previously noted at TPSs as well as to challenges implicit with the creation of, or founding of a school.

The loss of teachers from a school also creates a negative economic impact. According to a report from the Alliance for Excellent Education (2005) the cost of non retirees leaving the profession was nearly \$2.2 billion per year (Borman & Dowling, 2008). This number was dwarfed by a more recent national study from the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future that showed an annual cost of \$7.34 billion to replace all teachers (including retirees), with urban schools spending twice as much as suburban schools on replacing their leaving teachers (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007). Whether noting the impact of teacher attrition on student achievement, or reviewing the economic

balance sheet, it is clear that the retention of teachers is a significant policy area of concern, particularly for educators supporting students from low income backgrounds. The research on teacher retention therefore is worth reviewing.

In this chapter, I review this research in four parts; teacher retention as compared to other professions; reasons for teacher attrition as found in the research literature; the TPC- PCS teacher retention gap and theories as to why it exists; and the teacher stayers and why they remain with their schools. I first compare teacher retention rates to retention of professionals in other fields with similar pay and hours. I then review the literature that examines the reasons for teacher attrition across TPSs, PCSs, and “no excuses” charter schools and in particular note the ways that student and teacher demographics as well as salary, working conditions and school leadership affect teacher retention. In the next section I focus on a description of the data on the gap between teacher retention at TPSs and PCSs, I then review the current theories as to the cause of this gap, including a review of recent data showing increased teacher retention at charter schools and theories as to the cause of this growth in retention. I then turn my attention towards research on “the stayers” i.e. the teachers who elect to remain with their organizations over time.

Much of the discourse on teacher retention has focused on those who leave their school or the profession while relatively little attention has been paid to these “stayers,” nor to the factors that motivate, that inspire or that create an impetus for teachers to remain in their current role. I explore this gap in the literature by focusing on studies of teachers who have remained teaching at a consistent school while also noting areas where this type of research is lacking. I close the chapter by discussing the implications of the literature on teacher retention for this study.



## **TEACHER RETENTION AS COMPARED TO RETENTION IN OTHER PROFESSIONS**

### **Patterns in teacher retention**

Teachers generally leave the profession during either their first few years of teaching or towards the end of their career when they retire. This “U shaped” pattern of retention was validated by Ingersoll (2001), who studied more than 6,000 teachers in the 1980 and 1990 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), and additional researchers (Grissmer & Kirby, 1997; Shen, 1997). Ingersoll also determined that teachers were leaving the profession at greater rates than they were retiring (2001a, 2001b), which led researchers and policy makers to consider policies that would increase retention for younger teachers. This research differed from a more recent study by Harris and Adams (2007) who found early turnover of older teachers which they attributed to those teachers seeking access to favorable pension pay. Rates of teacher retention have remained relatively constant over time with the current rate of annual teacher attrition hovering at approximately 15% (Stuit & Smith, 2012).

A North Carolina study covering kindergarten through twelfth grade teachers showed that “teachers who left the profession were less effective than those who stayed at least five years” (Henry, Bastian, & Fortner, 2011). These findings align to prior research showing that teachers see greater gains in the achievement of their students from year one to two (Boyd et al., 2011; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007, 2010; Goldhaber & Anthony, 2007; Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2008; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005) and from year two to year three (Boyd et al., 2006; Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2008; Staiger & Rockoff, 2010). The North Carolina researchers noted that multiple studies,

“addressing teacher effects on student achievement, indicate an emerging research consensus: Less effective teachers are more likely to exit the profession” (Henry, Bastian, & Fortner, 2011, p.13).

This research shows that timing in a teacher’s career when they are considering a return to the classroom for their third or fourth year is critical and is therefore a key component of the planning for this study that will be outlined in chapter three. In addition these findings on the caliber of teachers who were leaving the classroom were supported by new research from Feng and Sass, who found similar patterns in their work (2017). However, their more recent research also showed that not only were teachers in the lowest performance quartile (as measured by Florida teacher value add data) leaving the classroom in greater numbers than their peers, but that the teachers in the top quartile were also leaving at similar rates. It would therefore seem that the group of teachers who choose to stay in the classroom have both greater student achievement results and greater efficacy than teachers who choose to leave before their fourth year of teaching, but that as a cohort these teacher stayers do not make up the top quartile of teachers as measured by student performance. That quartile is more likely to leave the profession sooner.

### **Comparing employee retention in other professions**

In comparison to other professions, teaching makes up one of the largest pieces of the American workforce. Teachers make up 4% of the employees in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998), which means that even a small change in retention impacts a vast number of people. There are twice as many teachers in the country as there are nurses and five times as many teachers as there are lawyers (Ingersoll, 2003). Current data shows that there are 3.1 million full time teachers in the U.S. serving 98,500 schools, of which 6,100 are working in charter schools (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015).

Studies have shown that teachers have a greater rate of attrition from either their school or the profession entirely (Ingersoll 2001a, 2001b) when compared with similar employees in comparable professions. For example in nursing, a field similar to teaching in its proportion of female to male employees, the mid 1990's turnover rate was approximately 12%. The overall teacher turnover rate during the same time period was 14%, with the national average for attrition across all professions holding at 11% per the Bureau of National Affairs (Ingersol 2001a, 2001b). A more recent analysis of teacher retention from the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) showed 30% teacher attrition which was 2% greater than attrition for police (28%) and 11% greater than nurses (19%) over the course of a six-year period.

Studies have also shown that turnover in high poverty schools is parallel to the attrition rates of serving on active duty in the US military or a local police force. Ingersoll and Perda utilized data in a 2014 study that showed that “45% of all public school teacher turnover took place in one quarter of the population of public schools” (p. 23), and that these schools were high poverty, high minority, and urban or rural. Students in these schools are 50% more likely to lose their teacher than students in wealthier schools (Ingersoll, 2001), and will have 20% of their teachers leave each year (Ingersoll, 2004). These percentages of annual teacher retention shows that the work of teaching in a low income community is one of the most volatile employments in the nation, and has a higher rate of attrition than policing at 14% annually (Yearwood & Freeman, 2004), and the US Army with an attrition rate of 18% after year three, the first time enlistees can decide to recommit (Congressional Budget Office, 2005). Given the levels of danger and unpredictability faced by police and the military as compared to a teacher's classroom, the comparison of teacher attrition to these fields is particularly eye opening.

## **REASONS FOR TEACHER ATTRITION AS FOUND IN THE RESEARCH LITERATURE**

A variety of researchers have examined the reasons teachers choose to leave their schools particularly schools serving students from low income backgrounds and minority students. Attrition in schools takes place when factors from either of these camps “push” and/ or “pull” (Hoxby & Leigh, 2004) teachers from their existing place of employment to leave their specific school or the profession altogether. Push factors describe events taking place within a school district or more specifically a school building that are “pushing” a teacher away from the school such as a poor manager, or challenging working conditions. Pull factors describe attractions for teachers in either different professions, different schools districts, or different schools within the district (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012) that pull them from their current role to a new role. Pull factors could include higher salary, the opportunity to work with a different demographic of students or the chance to work in an improved working environment.

The majority of the research on both push and pull factors on teacher attrition can be broadly divided into three camps: studies based on the demographics of the students and/ or the teachers within schools such as race, income level, or school location (rural/ urban/ suburban); studies focused on the conditions within schools and school districts including the caliber of school leadership, school climate, professional development opportunities and collegial support from colleagues; and studies focused on salaries and pay structures, which play a role in the retention of teachers within both the demographic camp and the level of support provided camp.

### **Salary and pay**

Research suggests that one of the key working conditions that matter to teachers is salary. Borman and Dowling (2006) found in their comprehensive literature review that in

multiple self-reported surveys from teachers, dissatisfaction with salary was associated with higher attrition and decreased commitment to teaching. This literature review found fourteen studies where salary levels predicted attrition whether it was among teachers who were earning higher salaries than their peers, or teachers with varying years of experience (Shin, 1995). In one of the more widely cited earlier studies on compensation and its impact on retention (Kirby, Berends, & Naftel, 1999) it was found that, “A \$1,000 increase in salary was associated with reduced attrition...of 2.9%” (Borman & Dowling, 2006, p. 200). In another Texas-based study of 300,000 teachers, Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (2004) revealed that salary increases in one district over another could lead teachers to switch schools.

Some studies revealed nuances in which types of teachers (grade level, and/ or subject area specific) were more focused than others on the importance of salary as they made decisions to remain in the classroom. For example, high school science teachers have proven to rate salary as a greater factor in their decision making to remain with their school than other teachers such as elementary teachers (Ingersoll & May, 2012). White female teachers in a Washington state study were less likely to leave their district based on salary (Gritz & Theobald, 1996), a finding that was validated for women from multiple backgrounds in a New York study (Brewer, 1996).

One of the key findings from Guarino, Santibanez, and Daley (2006) literature review was that “teachers were responsive to salaries outside their districts and their profession” (p. 194). In other words teachers seem to compare their earnings not only to other school districts but also to other professions. This finding is compelling in comparisons between TPSs and PCSs as charter schools have often been criticized for paying teachers less (Podgursky, 2008). Another key finding from multiple studies was that the greater the teacher pay the higher the probability that teachers will remain in the

profession (Murnane, Singer, Willett, Kemple, & Olsen, 1991; Dolton & Van der Klaauw, 1995, 1999). This finding obviously has limitations and provokes the question of “How much teaching salary is enough to keep teachers?” In his study of Texas teachers Hanushek (2004) sought to answer this question and determined that it would take considerable increases in salary (20-40%) to offset the desire of those Texas teachers to leave their struggling urban schools. In other words, unless raises were considerable, the social demographics of teachers’ students and their desire to leave urban schools serving predominantly minority students trumped their interest in minor raises.

### **The role of student demographics**

Research from the past forty years on teacher retention has also focused predominantly on the demographics of students and their communities (household income, education), and the teachers that serve these students. Variables in most of these studies include student and teacher variables. Student variables are often race, poverty levels and the location of schools such as urban, rural or suburban environments. Teacher demographics included in teacher attrition studies are age, years of experience, gender, race, level of education, prior personal academic achievement and specific subject and grade levels taught. I outline some of the more consistent patterns across this type of research by drawing upon two key meta studies of teacher attrition; Borman and Dowling’s (2008) work covering 34 studies on teacher attrition and Guarino et al.’s 2006 review of empirical literature on teacher recruitment and retention covering 46 studies. Although these meta studies also include recent research on the impact of school-based initiatives such as improved mentoring and staff support networks on teacher attrition, the majority of the studies included in both projects are based upon demographic factors that are not always malleable through policy.

The general premise of many of these studies on the impact of student demographics on teacher retention can be summed up in the findings of Guarino et al. (2006), who note that, “Schools with higher proportions of minority, low-income, and low performing students tended to have higher attrition rates. In most studies urban school districts had higher attrition rates than suburban and rural districts” (p. 200).

Borman and Dowling (2008) found seven empirical studies that all showed statistically significant data that indicated, “schools with higher percentages of minorities suffered higher odds of teacher attrition than did schools with fewer minority students” (p. 393). It is important to note that both the demographic and school based reasons for teacher attrition are applicable to both TPS and to PCSs but that some of these reasons emerge in different manifestations when applied in a PCS context as will be later described.

### **Teacher background and demographics**

There have also been multiple studies comparing the demographics of teachers who choose to leave the teaching profession or leave their current school. These patterns are not due to school environment, leadership or culture but rather traits that teachers arrive with when they begin their teaching career. Demographic traits that have proven to be important to consider when predicting teacher attrition include; age, sex, race, and academic qualifications, and the grade level and content that teachers are being placed in. As noted in the introduction to this section, years of teaching experience remains one of the most accurate predictors of teacher tenure, with beginning teachers generally more likely to exit the profession (Ingersoll, 2001a). Multiple studies of Texas teachers have shown that teachers with less than two years of teaching experience are more likely to leave the profession than those with greater tenure, except for those who were nearing retirement age, (Grissmer & Kirby, 1997; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004). Gender and race have

also been researched in teacher retention studies. Findings show that minority teachers are more likely to remain at certain schools than whites (Ingersoll, 2001), and that men remained in their teaching roles longer than women. This was true in large sample sets of data for teachers in Texas (Kirby et al., 1999) and in Washington state, (Gritz & Theobald, 1996). In a highly nuanced finding, Borman and Dowling's meta study (2008), found that "the odds of attrition are higher among teachers who are female, white, young, and married and who have a child" (p. 396).

The academic qualifications of teachers also have an impact on their potential for leaving their schools. Multiple studies show "that teachers with higher measured ability have a higher probability of leaving and that retention rates varied by level of education" (Guarino et al., 2006, p.188). Teachers with higher ACT scores and/ or teachers with degrees from more selective institutions have been found to be less likely to return to the classroom than those with lower scores (Podgursky et al, 2004). This has been found to be true for teachers leaving the field of teaching as well as those leaving their specific campus but remaining in the profession (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). This research potentially serves as an important flag for No Excuses Charter Management Organizations (NECMOs) since many NECMOs focus on hiring teachers with high levels of academic achievement (Torres, 2014) even if they are new to the profession (Roch & Sai, 2016).

### **School location- urban, rural, suburban**

Research has shown that the location of a school matters a great deal in the retention patterns for teachers. Ingersoll's study (2004), shows that schools located in an urban high poverty setting experience greater teacher attrition (22%) than schools located in rural high poverty settings (16%), and especially greater attrition than schools located in low poverty settings (13%). These findings from Ingersoll's 2001 study of national SASS and TFS data



were mirrored in a 2003 study which showed that teachers working in high poverty schools had a 21% attrition rate and while teachers in low poverty schools had 14% attrition rate (Planty, Hussar, & Snyder, 2009). Another study noted that math and science teachers were disproportionately leaving urban classrooms to migrate to suburban classrooms for a variety of reasons (Ingersoll & May, 2012).

Some research points to the proximity of suburban schools as exacerbating the departure of high performing urban teachers. Low teacher retention in urban impoverished areas remains a challenge particularly when specific urban high poverty areas are compared to suburban locations nearby. In a study using data on the New York City region the authors determined that “fewer than 28% of New York City teachers were still in the same school 5 years later as compared with 46% in suburban schools” (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002, p.49). It is possible that urban teachers are more likely to remain in the classroom if they have a more acute understanding of the undertaking ahead of them before they begin their teaching career. A recent 2015 study found that teachers who had themselves attended school in an urban setting and had completed their student teaching training in a high poverty urban setting would likely remain teaching in an urban setting for at least three years if not more (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012).

## **SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS**

### **Student poverty impacting teacher retention**

Differences in the retention patterns of teachers supporting students from low income backgrounds versus those who are not is an indication that a school’s location and student demographics matter a great deal in regards to teacher attrition. Teacher attrition data on schools serving students in poverty is particularly important to this study given the high student poverty rates at most NECMOs.

In their meta analysis of 38 articles reviewing causes and theories on teacher retention Borman and Dowling clearly found patterns of high teacher attrition in schools with greater levels of poverty. The authors specifically noted three studies where the odds of teacher attrition greatly increased when the student population was primarily made up of students from low income backgrounds. In one study the authors found that the odds of attrition in schools composed of 20% or more free-lunch eligible students were 1.73 times greater than the odds for schools with less than 20% free lunch eligibility (2008, p. 393). They found eight studies that “suggested that schools with higher percentages of students qualifying for free or reduced-price meals had higher odds of teacher turnover (2008, p. 393).

### **Student race impacting teacher retention**

The racial characteristics of a school’s student body also impact teacher attrition patterns. A study utilizing data on 300,000 Texas teachers from 1993-1996 and found that schools serving greater proportions of minority students “had greater difficulty retaining teachers from high achieving low minority schools (E. Hanushek et al., 2004). The author also determined that white teachers tended to leave schools with higher minority populations and moved to teach in schools with greater populations of white students, although African American teachers were actually more likely to move to a school with higher numbers of African American students than the schools where they had previously taught (E. Hanushek et al., 2004). In a review of five separate quantitative studies, “the odds of attrition among teachers in predominantly minority schools were up to 3 times greater than those for majority-White schools” (Borman & Dowling, 2008, p. 392).

A more recent 2012 study by Ingersoll and May focusing on math and science teachers highlighted a similar pattern of teachers leaving high minority and high poverty

schools to teach in schools with a lower population of minority students. The departure of teachers from low income high minority schools is not limited to only math or science teachers. A 2015 study focused on Washington state teachers found that: “In virtually every measure of teacher quality- licensing, experience, value added...across elementary, middle and school classrooms” is inequitably distributed across every indicator of student disadvantage including free reduced price lunch status and underrepresented minorities” (Goldhaber, Lavery, & Theobald, 2015).

The authors found that these patterns in teacher quality were the result of teacher attrition and flight from lower income schools serving high minority populations to wealthier schools serving low minority populations. In other words teachers, who had a greater impact on student performance regardless of the measure used to validate their superior performance were more likely to be found working with non minority, non low income students oftentimes because they had intentionally left a working environment that served those students from low income backgrounds. This study highlights the need to determine ways to retain teachers for low income minority students since it is clear that schools serving these students often employ highly talented teachers as evidenced by these teachers’ student achievement results and their recruitment to other school districts.

One of the more interesting exceptions to the migration of teachers from low income high minority often urban schools to suburban campuses are the prevalence of African American and Latino/a teacher who remain teaching students in low income high minority neighborhoods, a finding supporting by multiple researchers (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Sexton, 2010; Corman, 1993; Hanushek et al., 2004; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & May, 2012; Kirby et al., 1999). A 2012 study focused on Latino/a teachers coming to the profession through Teach For America noted that the Latino/a teachers in the study:

Cited a desire to combat the negative experiences they had as K–12 students as their primary motivation for entering the profession. They viewed schools as sites of transformation and possibility and overcame numerous obstacles to pursue a teaching career. (Irizarry & Donaldson, p.167)

The potent belief of these educators in wanting to teach in schools filled with students that look like them and that may have had challenges in school similar to their own is compelling information for those interested in increasing teacher retention at schools serving students from minority backgrounds. In addition to the increased retention of these teachers from minority backgrounds, recent research also shows that students who have these teachers receive “rather large educational benefits” (Dee, 2004, p. 209).

### **Grade level and subject taught influencing teacher retention**

Research has shown that some types of schools are more desirable for teachers as evidenced by the flight patterns of teachers from some schools towards others. For example secondary teachers are more likely to leave their school than elementary school teachers (Henke, Zahn, & Carroll, 2001), particularly middle school teachers due to issues teaching adolescents (Carter & Carter, 2000). Math and science teachers have also been found to be more likely to leave their school than non math or science teachers (Arnold, Choy, & Bobbitt, 1993; Grissmer & Kirby, 1992; Kirby et al., 1999).

### **Principal turnover**

Research shows that a school principal can impact a school in a variety of ways. For example some studies showed that principals can impact student achievement through teacher selection and setting clear goals (Brewer, 1993), or through the building of trust and sharing of leadership with teachers, (Louis & Dretzke, 2010). Another study also

showed that goal setting, discipline and mediation impact student achievement results (Eberts & Stone, 1988). One study even found principal impact of one positive standard deviation on student achievement (Coelli & Green, 2012). Given these findings on the potential impact of the school principal on student achievement it is reasonable to assume that longevity in the position would indicate stronger student achievement outcomes. Two replicable school leadership studies have done just that showing that principal experience is a valid indicator of student achievement (D. Clark, Martorell, & Rockoff, 2009). Another similar study showed that principal turnover had strong negative effects on student achievement, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds and students with many first year teachers (Béteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012). Given that both of these demographic groups-- students from low income backgrounds and first year teachers-- permeate many NECMOs, the longevity of principals within not just a NECMO school network but within a NECMO school building bears additional scrutiny (a topic I will return to later in this review).

### **Working conditions matter**

In the late 2000s some researchers using school culture surveys began to find that teachers were actually choosing to leave the schools where students from low-income backgrounds were educated and the chaotic environment where that education took place rather than leaving the students themselves. (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2011). The research focused on the caliber of instruction, campus leadership, and the collegiality of the work environment within a school building. Borman and Dowling (2008) noted the importance of this shift in the literature on teacher retention. After reviewing more than 150 studies and deeply analyzing 90 empirical studies on teacher retention they came to the conclusion that “the characteristics of teachers’ work conditions are more salient for predicting

attrition than previously noted in the literature” (Borman & Dowling, 2008, p. 399). Keeping this point in mind this research has sought to disentangle demographic factors from school or district led initiatives in order to better establish how working conditions within schools impact teacher attrition. Simon and Moore Johnson articulate this well in their research writing: “Researchers who included both working conditions and race in their model found that working conditions explain away all or most of the relationship between student demographics and teacher turnover” (2013, p. 14).

This is a powerful premise as it possibly shifts greater influence on the retention of teachers towards school principals and district level administrators. This new research opens a door towards seeing teacher attrition in a new light. Time will tell but perhaps future researchers and practitioners will not view teacher attrition as an inevitable event based on the location of a school or the racial background of students. Perhaps they will see it instead as a malleable outcome contingent on the culture, collegiality and leadership presence of the adults in the building and the adults in the district who influence policy. Here are some of the key tenants of this new research:

Guarino et al. (2006) found that working conditions including administrative support, teacher autonomy and mentoring programs were all influential in teachers’ decision making process for remaining with their schools (2006). In the other broad review on the literature, Borman and Dowling (2008) also found that working conditions under which they include administrative support, professional development and physical work environments all have a considerable impact on teacher attrition. For this literature review I choose to define working conditions using research by Simon and Moore Johnson (2011) who focused their research on how working conditions in schools affect teacher attrition. They divided working conditions into various social components impacting the working conditions of a school and determined that the most important elements were; “school

leadership, collegial relationships, and elements of school culture” (p. 4). I selected these three components of working conditions due to their inclusivity of broad components of the human experience within schools and their functionality across grade levels and content areas. These three components also resonated with my personal experience as a school principal as I found each of these three areas to be particularly important when either recruiting new teachers to the school or communicating with them on their decisions to remain or leave the school teaching team.

There are some components of “working conditions” that do not fall under this definition including the physical school environment and the impact of different types of content areas e.g. special education on the experience of various working conditions in schools. I include a brief description of literature on the physical plant, but do not review literature on special education. This rationale is based on an extensive study comparing teacher attrition between general education teachers and special education teachers using SASS survey data did not find statistically significant findings in teacher attrition rates between these teaching groups (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008).

### ***Working conditions—school leadership***

Multiple studies, including the meta studies on teacher attrition, have concluded that a school’s administrative support for teachers and more specifically the support the principal provides to teachers contributes to “lower levels of teacher attrition and migration” (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006, p.202). Ingersoll (2001a, 2001b), argued that organizational factors within a school, including lack of support from administrators, and a lack of input in school decision making were both key factors that influence teacher attrition, both factors that are contingent on the caliber of the administrative team at a school. One of the most glaring examples of principal leadership impacting teacher attrition

came from a study in Chicago where 54% of high school teachers have left their classroom after four years along with 51% of the elementary school teachers. The study concluded that teachers are more likely to remain in their school where “they trust their principal as an instructional leader” (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009, p.2). This study found that teachers had a 5% greater likelihood of staying in their school based on a high level of principal trust alone.

A later study based in New York City found that teacher perceptions of principals alone had the largest impact on teachers’ decisions to stay or go (Boyd et al., 2011). Confidence in one’s principal therefore is critical for teacher retention. This sentiment is particularly evident in charter schools and is even more acute in charter management organizations (CMOs). In a study of 30 different CMOs and standalone charter schools researchers found that any changes in the level of administrative support had a strong impact on teacher satisfaction and ultimately on attrition (Roch & Sai, 2016).

### ***Working conditions-collegial relationships***

In their study on teacher retention and satisfaction Simon and Moore Johnson (2011) found that “supportive collegial relationships allow teachers to learn from peers, solve problems together, and hold one another accountable” (p.27). This finding matches prior research that shows that teams that work to improve how they engage and communicate with one another have also improved their efficacy and results both in and outside of education (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). Accountability had previously been shown to be crucial for building relationships for teachers in schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and also in business where it has been noted as the critical component for a business’s ability to achieve results (Lencioni, 2002). Increased teacher collegiality on a teaching team matters for teacher retention because strong teacher collegiality directly leads to strong



teacher satisfaction which is linked to teacher retention (Johnson et al., 2011; Roch & Sai, 2016).

Research has also shown that one of the ways that teaching teams build collegiality is through a shared sense of mission (Shuls & Maranto, 2014), (which forms the core of most NECMOs as will be noted later in section four). A shared mission has been found to be particularly helpful for building bonds of collegiality between teachers at schools serving low income and minority students where teachers see their combined efforts as a form of social justice for their students (Achinstein et al., 2010; Cochran-Smith, McQuillan, & Mitchell, 2012).

### ***Working conditions—school culture***

School culture is challenging to define but research has found that it plays a role in the retention of teachers, particularly when considering how school culture is intertwined with student discipline practices and parental engagement and support (Simon & Johnson, 2013) as well as teacher autonomy. Student discipline and the safety of students and adults in a school creates a baseline for culture, when that baseline does not occur and a school is perceived as dangerous for students or staff teachers will choose to leave (Allensworth et al., 2009). Disruptive student behavior particularly in high schools has also been shown to impact teacher retention. Research shows that parental engagement can dictate teachers' decision to remain in teaching (Allensworth et al., 2009; Loeb & Darling-Hammond, 2005) and that parental communication is more important for elementary teacher attrition than for teachers in other grade levels (Allensworth et al., 2009). The autonomy that teachers experience in creating lessons or responding to student challenges is also a key part of a school's culture and was found to be a greater driver of teacher attrition for some teachers

than others (Guarino et al., 2006). For example mathematics teachers left the classroom for this reason more so than they did for salary reasons (Ingersoll & May, 2012).

### ***Working conditions- physical plant***

In addition to factors determined by school leadership teacher collegiality and school culture, the caliber of the physical plant has been found to play a role in teachers' decisions to remain or stay with their school. In a study in the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities researchers found that teachers are 5% more likely to remain with their school if the building is considered "in 'A' condition vs. 'F' condition" (Buckley, Schneider, & Shang, 2005, p. 6). Another study showed that teachers in a classroom with "satisfactory conditions" were more likely to have a positive attitude about their workplace (Earthman & Lemasters, 2009; Henry et al., 2011), which could lead to increased retention.

## **THE TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOL- PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL TEACHER RETENTION GAP & THEORIES AS TO WHY THIS GAP EXISTS**

### **Data: TPS retention. vs. PCS teacher retention**

As noted in chapter one, multiple studies have shown that there is a significant teacher retention gap between TPSs and PCSs (Marvel, Lyter, Peltolam & Morton, 2004; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Stuit & Smith, 2012). One of the most important data sources for researchers studying this teacher retention gap has been the SASS survey which is administered every four years. A key 2012 study utilizing 2003-2004 SASS data included 13,000 teachers at 2500 different TPSs and 1000 PCS teachers at 200 different PCSs. Findings from this study showed that PCS teacher turnover was twice as high as teacher turnover at TPSs (Stuit & Smith, 2012). PCSs have even been described in one study utilizing multiple variables to analyze potential influences on teacher departures as "the greatest predictor of teacher attrition" (Sass, Flores, Claeys, & Pérez, 2012, p.19). Another

study highlighted the PCS-TPS retention gap showing that, “Charter school teachers are 2.47 times *more* likely to leave their schools and 2.70 times *more* likely to leave teaching altogether than to stay at their same schools” (Renzulli, Parrott, & Beattie, 2011, p. 20).

In the most recently released survey data from 2012-2013 school year a fascinating trend developed which showed that the PCS-TPS teacher retention gap had actually narrowed from the administration of the previous SASS survey to the most recent survey (the survey is now called the National Teacher and Principal Survey). Data taken in the 2008-2009 survey showed that 23.8% of PCS teachers left after the school year compared to 15.4% of TPS teachers. More recent data showed that only 18.5% of PCS teachers left compared to 15.6% of TPS teachers (Stuit & Smith, 2012). This gap differential of 5.3% is certainly worth studying.

Since the newly named National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) survey takes place every four years and the last year data was collected was 2012-2013, the most recent data from the 2015-2016 NTPS is still being processed. Once this data has been collected it will be interesting to see if the trend of the closing gap between PCS and TPS will continue to close. The 2015-2016 data will also present the first opportunity to compare nationwide non profit CMO teacher retention- the closest data point to a NECMO teacher identifier in the survey- over time. Like the previous survey the data from 2015-2016 will differentiate charter school types by non profit CMO, for profit EMO or stand alone charter school.<sup>8</sup> The 2008-2009 SASS did not include a differentiator by PCS type. This new level of detail will still provide powerful comparison teacher retention data across the nation for non profit CMOs of which 48% are NECMOs.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> [http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/pdf/1516/NTPS-3\\_052115.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/pdf/1516/NTPS-3_052115.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> In 2014 CMOs made up approximately 1/5 of all charter schools in the US: <http://dashboard2.publiccharters.org/National/> of that number it is estimated that approximately 48% are NECMOs: <http://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/Charter%20Research%200908%20FINAL.pdf>

### **TPS retention. vs. No Excuses Charter Management Organization (NECMO) teacher retention**

Texas data provides a helpful lens through which to view NECMO vs. TPS teacher retention given the number of large NECMOs that operate in the state. KIPP, IDEA Public Schools, Harmony Public Schools and YES Prep all operate schools in Texas serving more than 70,000 students combined.<sup>10</sup> Based on recent 2015-2016 data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), teacher attrition at the majority of these networks remained at least ten percentage points lower with the exception of IDEA, than the Texas state average of 16.5%. Some networks such as KIPP in Austin and Harmony in Houston had teacher retention rates that trailed the state average for annual teacher turnover by more than 24%. See Table 2 for additional data on NECMO teacher attrition.

Table 2: Texas NECMO Teacher Attrition vs. State Average

| <u>School</u>                        | <u>Annual Teacher Turnover (%)</u> |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| State of Texas                       | 16.5%                              |
| KIPP (Austin, TX)                    | 44.2%                              |
| Harmony Public Schools (Houston, TX) | 40.6%                              |
| YES Prep (Houston, TX)               | 27.7%                              |
| IDEA Public Schools (TX)             | 20.6%                              |
| KIPP (San Antonio), TX               | 33.1%                              |

*Source: Texas Education Administration 2015-2016 TAPR report*

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.kipp.org/schools/kipp-regions>; <http://www.ideapublicschools.org/our-story/expansion-growth>; <http://www.harmonytexas.org/Schools.aspx>; <http://www.yesprep.org/our-model>

Given this disparity in the teacher attrition data between the NECMOs and Texas TPSs, and particularly given the NECMOs' focus on the very traits that should lead to increased teacher retention this gap is worth reviewing.

### **Theories on the TPS-PCS teacher retention gap**

Multiple theories have been presented to explain the reason for teacher retention gap between TPSs and PCSs. Some researchers attribute the gap to the same challenges that decrease teacher retention at all American schools, with these challenges being exacerbated at charter schools and at times CMOs. For example teacher salaries have been cited as the cause of teacher attrition at TPSs in multiple studies (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Imazeki, 2005; Kelly, 2004), and have also been identified as one of the top reasons for teacher departure at charter schools (Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003; Miron & Applegate, 2007). A specific example of salary constraints leading to teacher departures was cataloged in an article in the Dallas News<sup>11</sup> describing working conditions and teacher pay at the Harmony charter management organization in Texas. The article cited low teacher salaries and “untenable working conditions within the schools”, as the key factors that pushed teachers from the school. Harmony Schools across Texas had a 28% teacher attrition rate as compared to a rate of 16% percent for all Texas Public School teachers.<sup>12</sup>

An additional cause of teacher retention across all type of schools that has taken on additional significance when reviewing teacher retention at CMOs are the challenges associated with educating students in poverty. The state of Texas offers a compelling vantage point for comparing charter school demographics to TPS demographics given that

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/news/2016/05/24/texas-charter-school-network-accused-of-bias-and-self-dealing>

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[https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/cgi/sas/broker?\\_service=marykay&year4=2015&year2=15&\\_debug=0&single=N&title=2015+Texas+Academic+Performance+Reports&\\_program=perf rept.perfmast.sas&prgopt=2015%2Ftapr%2Ftapr.sas&ptype=P&level=district&search=district&namenum=Harmony&district=227816](https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/cgi/sas/broker?_service=marykay&year4=2015&year2=15&_debug=0&single=N&title=2015+Texas+Academic+Performance+Reports&_program=perf rept.perfmast.sas&prgopt=2015%2Ftapr%2Ftapr.sas&ptype=P&level=district&search=district&namenum=Harmony&district=227816)

there are more than 600 charter schools in the state,<sup>13</sup> which enroll 4% of the students in the state. According to recent data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), Texas students at charter schools are more likely to be minorities (21% African American and 57% Latino Hispanic at PCS compared to 17% African American, 52% Latino Hispanic at TPSs), to come from low income households (70% Public Charter, 60% TPSs) and to be labeled as English Language Learners (20% PCS, 17% TPSs).<sup>14</sup> Given previously noted research between increased teacher attrition at schools that educate students from these backgrounds (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Guarino et al., 2006), from earlier in the chapter some researchers have concluded that PCS teacher attrition may be greater than the attrition of TPSs because PCSs are more likely to be serving students from low income backgrounds (Stuit & Smith, 2012). However, despite the research aligning the gap in teacher retention to both student demographics and teacher salaries I believe that the challenge of retaining teachers at CMOs is much more nuanced than salary and demographics and that part of that nuance lies within teacher satisfaction around their principal and the working conditions established by that leader.

***NECMO teacher satisfaction is lower than PCS satisfaction***

An additional gap between TPS and PCS teacher retention is evident in recent research on teacher satisfaction. A 2016 study utilized the 2007-2008 SASS data (the survey has been given approximately every four years<sup>15</sup>), to compare teacher job satisfaction at three different types of schools including two different charter school models; traditional PCS, for profit charter schools managed by education management organizations (EMOs) and non-profit charter management organizations (CMOs).

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.publiccharters.org/>

<sup>14</sup> 2014 Comprehensive Report on Texas Public Schools

<sup>15</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/>

Researchers discovered that teachers are less satisfied with their work in PCSs led by EMOs or CMOs than in traditional PCSs and “that teachers in EMO-managed schools appear less satisfied than those in stand-alone charter schools” (Roch & Sai, 2016, p. 1). CMO teachers’ satisfaction was also less than satisfaction at TPSs and at stand-alone PCSs but not as low as the satisfaction levels at EMOs. In other words, CMOs, the group with which NECMOs are affiliated have both low teacher retention and low teacher work satisfaction when compared to TPSs.

### **Theories on the TPS-NECMO teacher retention gap**

As the gap between teacher retention at TPS and charter schools has become more clearly defined, a small set of researchers have focused specifically on NECMOs in order to better understand why their teacher retention has been so much lower than other school districts. This research has also emphasized prior literature describing how teacher demographics, particularly teacher age and newness to the teaching profession disproportionately impact teacher attrition at NECMO schools as well as the role that school leaders play in either motivating or demotivating teachers to remain with the NECMO school. In order to best explain this research, I first note the effort that has been made by NECMOs to close this teacher retention gap with TPSs and then describe three theories on the NECMO-TPS teacher gap based on recent literature; a broad theory on teacher demographics at NECMOs leading to increased teacher attrition, a theory based on undergraduate institution and finally a theory based on principal turnover.

### ***But what they are doing should be working!***

No Excuses Charter Management Organizations (NECMOs) have worse teacher retention than TPSs despite the fact that NECMOs do the things that based on research

should increase teacher retention. Simon and Moore Johnson (2011) lay out the formula for the successful retention of teachers working with students from low income backgrounds in urban (where most NECMOs are) or rural schools. As noted previously they describe in their review of recent studies on teacher retention that they feel they have successfully disentangled the causes of teacher attrition from the students themselves and instead focus on the school work environment and the adults in the school. They write,

Some combination of social working conditions— the quality of school leadership, the caliber of collegial relationships, and specific aspects of school culture—is found to influence teachers’ satisfaction and their anticipated or actual career decisions... an inclusive environment characterized by respect and trust among colleagues, formal structures that promote collaboration, and the presence of a shared mission among teachers....(p. 22)

Using themes from this research on teacher retention, NECMOs have taken action yet with little to show for it. For example, in one Texas based study researchers comparing a NECMO school serving students from low income backgrounds to a traditional district school noted similar efforts occurring at the school as those noted by Moore and Johnson as being ideal for teacher retention. The authors wrote in their findings that: “Our results are consistent with previous studies that suggest charter schools environments dedicated to serving underrepresented student populations are academically oriented, exhibit high expectations for student performance, are instructionally supportive, and attract mission-driven teachers” (Wei, Patel, & Young, 2014).

Researchers have found that NECMOs explicitly market and recruit teachers by touting a strong culture and mission focus (Torres, 2014) as well as an emphasis on excellent instructional leadership (Torres, 2016). Examples of this can be seen at the KIPP charter network on its website where the nation’s largest NECMO states “At KIPP you



never stop learning.”<sup>16</sup> The website includes information on professional development structures for teachers and a variety of training programs for future and current principals as well as a succinct mission statement on their students succeeding in college.

Another large NECMO, IDEA Public Schools has similar themes on its website touting principal training, peer collaboration for teachers and like KIPP, a mission statement focused on “college for all children.”<sup>17</sup> In other words the research on best practices in retaining teachers plays out on the websites and recruitment materials of some of the largest NECMOs in the country. The IDEA website even focuses on the importance of school leadership in regards to teacher retention which reads, “Excellent campus leaders can dramatically impact the development and retention of teachers... IDEA Public Schools prioritizes having excellent leaders in every school.”<sup>18</sup>

Many of the NECMOs in the nation advertise within the Teach For America (TFA) alumni magazine which is sent to all TFA alumni across the country. Since TFA in some locations places from 60% (Chicago)<sup>19</sup> to 90% (Los Angeles)<sup>20</sup> of its teachers in charters its alumni magazine is a source of information for current charter teachers or those alumni considering a move to a charter school or a NECMO as the case may be. This magazine<sup>21</sup> can also be viewed as a type of laboratory for teacher recruitment to NECMO charter schools as seen through the content of the advertisements for these NECMO schools throughout each edition. The advertisements describe many previously mentioned best practices in reducing teacher attrition such as collegial relationships (Simon & Johnson, 2013) and mission orientation (K, University, & Education, 2009; Shuls & Maranto, 2014).

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.kipp.org/careers/why-kipp>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.ideapublicschools.org/our-approach>

<sup>18</sup> <http://jobs.ideapublicschools.org/school-leadership>

<sup>19</sup> <http://catalyst-chicago.org/2013/11/record-teach-america-placement/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://laschoolreport.com/most-teach-for-america-teachers-will-end-up-at-charters/>

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.teachforamerica.org/system/files/od\\_spring\\_2016\\_web.pdf](https://www.teachforamerica.org/system/files/od_spring_2016_web.pdf)

For example, one advertisement features peer collaboration with a bold statement proclaiming, “The best place to work...a collaborative, reflective and supportive environment” (DC Preparatory), another advertisement has a focus on aspiring principals and training for them with slogans stating, “Make an Impact”(Building Excellent Schools). Nearly all of the advertisements tout the mission focus of their schools; “Find your Why” (Blackstone Valley Prep) and the support teachers receive, “Where Great Teachers Become Extraordinary” (YES Prep). In other words, these NECMO schools have clearly done their homework on what school factors will pull teachers to a school that offers these components of school collegiality, culture and mission. And yet despite this alignment between practice and research still the NECMOs fail to retain teachers at rates even remotely close to TPSs. Why does this happen?

### ***NECMO gap theory- teacher demographics***

NECMO teachers are different than teachers at TPSs and are also different than teachers at PCSs. As noted in the research below they are younger, whiter, have less teaching experience, and are more likely to have attended elite undergraduate institutions. The theory of attrition due to teacher demographics is based on the premise that these combined demographic differences; specifically youth (defined in many studies as an age less than thirty), ethnicity, and a lack of teaching experience (often noted as three or fewer years in the classroom), contribute in some way to an increased likelihood that a teacher from a NECMO is more likely to leave either the school or the teaching profession entirely. Research has shown that these factors alone can each negatively impact teacher retention at both TPSs and PCSs. When these factors are combined within the teaching populace of most NECMOs than teacher retention declines, the question is whether the demographics of the teachers are the actual reason for teacher departures or merely an indicator. It is

challenging to stipulate that teacher age, ethnicity, and teaching experience cause attrition in and of themselves, but the correlation between these factors and a lack of teacher retention are unmistakable.

### ***NECMO gap theory-demographics-teacher age***

Some studies have shown that the age of teachers who leave schools is consistent between both TPS and PCS (Miron & Applegate, 2007). However alternative research shows that new and/or young teachers at charter schools are 3.3 times more likely to leave their schools than new and/or young teachers at TPSs, (Calimeris, 2013). One rationale for the early departure of young teachers from their charter schools is their certification pathways through programs such as Teach For America (Darling-Hammond, 2005) which require a commitment of two years of teaching, thus potentially reducing longer commitments in the classroom. And yet in a 2011 study focused on Los Angeles Unified Schools showed that young charter school teachers were 46% more likely to remain with their school than young teachers at a TPSs (Newton, Rivero, Fuller, & Dauter, 2011). The authors attribute this trend to

the reality of the job demand in small charter schools is such that, younger teachers who may not have family responsibilities (e.g., not yet married with children) may be able to handle the intense teaching demands more than those who have family responsibilities” (2011, p.46).

This theory is plausible considering the age of teachers working at PCSs, particularly NECMO schools. Some studies have found that 34% of PCS teachers were below age 30 as compared to only 20% of teachers in working in a TPS (Harris, 2007; Stuit & Smith, 2012). This percentage jumps when comparing data from NECMOs where 50% of the teachers were below age thirty (Roch & Sai, 2016). This number matters because

teachers who start teaching earlier in their lives are more likely to leave the profession regardless of the type of school they teach in than teachers who start teaching after age thirty (Feng, 2006; Kirby, Berends, & Naftel, 1999; Quartz et al., 2008; Theobald & Laine, 2003). With so many teachers under thirty on the staff of NECMOs the performance of these schools can often be reliant on these teachers who are younger, potentially able to work long hours (Torres, 2015) and who may lack family responsibilities. Given the lack of responsibilities at home these teachers may be able to handle the demands of NECMO schedules and student achievement expectations, but only for a certain number of years.

Prior research on teachers from all school backgrounds shows marriage and the advent of children in a household as having a negative impact on teacher retention (Reis, 1991; Stinebrickner, 1998). Given the relatively new advent of charter schools in the past 25 years, there are few studies noting whether marriage and family have an impact on the young PCS teachers noted in the previously mentioned study. However if trends from data on earlier TPS teachers do apply to PCS teachers than one would assume that the age of PCS would prove to be more of a factor in teacher attrition as those teachers began to marry and begin families.

### ***NECMO gap theory-demographics-teacher ethnicity***

A review of seventy studies on teacher retention and teacher ethnicity from across the nation showed that white teachers are more likely to remain in a teaching role than teachers of color. This study was not differentiated for teachers from TPS and PCS environments but its findings are interesting particularly when schools serving minority students from low income backgrounds are isolated. The authors found that, “Teachers of color are more likely than Whites to work and remain in “hard-to-staff” urban schools with

high proportions of students from low-income and non-dominant racial and cultural communities...” (Achinstein et al., 2010, p. 1).

This trend was also identified in a similar example where Latino/a teachers with Latino/a students in high minority, high poverty schools had increased retention rates in those settings as compared to white teachers (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). These studies are important when considering teacher retention at NECMOs as the majority of these school systems serve these exact types of students. Although there are fewer studies on teacher retention by ethnicity that differentiate by school type a widely cited 2007 study showed that teacher ethnicity has minimal effect on regressions analyzing teacher retention at PCSs (Miron & Applegate). However, a later study matching the findings from the 2010 meta-study on all schools found that teachers from African American and Latino backgrounds are more likely to remain at charter schools than their white peers who also teach at charter schools (Wei, Patel, & Young, 2014). In an interesting 2011 multivariable analysis incorporating the racial demographics of both the students and teachers *and* the variable of TPS vs. PCS staff satisfaction the authors found that the charter school environment itself seemed to be the differentiating factor for teachers. The authors wrote: “The charter school environment actually ameliorated the impact of race. In fact our multilevel analysis shows that for white teachers the negative effect of teaching in predominantly black schools is decreased when they teach in charter schools” (Renzulli et al., 2011, p. 30). In other words, this study showed that although teaching in a school with predominantly black students may traditionally drive some white teachers away, when white teachers were teaching black students in a charter school they were more likely to remain teaching there.

Although a recent study on Latino/a teachers attrition did not differentiate by PCS/TPS placement the study did show that Latino/a teachers going through the Teach For America program were more likely to want to teach in both high poverty, high minority

schools and to remain in these schools in comparison to white teachers in a similar cohort (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012). Given the high numbers of TFA teachers within NECMOs (Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014) this study although not directly focused on charter school retention is a potential indicator of a NECMO trend.

### ***NECMO gap theory-demographics-teacher experience***

In comparison to TPSs, PCSs often have teachers with less experience and as noted previously, research has found less experienced teachers are more likely to leave schools (Grissmer & Kirby, 1997; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004). Two studies showed that 37% of teachers at all PCSs have taught for less than 3 years, and that only 16.5% of teachers at TPSs have taught for that brief of an amount of time (Harris & Adams, 2007; Stuit & Smith, 2012). This gap is even more apparent when looking at data comparing NECMOs and TPSs. A study that differentiated between charter schools run by management organizations and stand alone charters found that TPS averaged 12.7 years of experience, a much greater amount than charters under management organizations (including NECMOs) with an average of 5.6 years of teaching experience. (Cannata, Penaloza, & Penaloza, 2012). Data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) shows this trend to be apparent across the 5 million students in the state where the average teaching experience for TPS (excluding charters) is 11.6 years vs. 4.5 years for teachers at charters.<sup>22</sup> National data from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) from the same time period (2011) shows that 53% of all of the charter schools in Texas were part of a CMO, and that 51% of the total charter school students in the state attended a CMO.<sup>23</sup> The fact

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.tasb.org/legislative/documents/chartercomp2012.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/NAPCS-CMO-EMO-DASHBOARD-DETAILS\\_20111103T102812.pdf](http://www.publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/NAPCS-CMO-EMO-DASHBOARD-DETAILS_20111103T102812.pdf)

that more than half of the charters in the state belong to CMOs shows that like other charters, CMOs have a much lower number of experienced teachers than TPSs.

Although I was unable to obtain national or statewide data on NECMO teacher attrition and years of teaching experience, a brief review of Texas state data shows large gaps in teacher retention rates and years of teaching experience between Texas NECMOs and Texas state averages for these indicators. In order to collect this information, I accessed statewide and NECMO data on the Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) collected by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). I selected the NECMOs included based on the size of their organization (number of students served) and the percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced meals. See Table 3 for this data.

Table 3: Texas NECMO Teacher Demographics vs. State Averages

| <u>NECMO</u>                     | <u>Annual<br/>Teacher<br/>Turnover<br/>(%)</u> | <u>Avg.<br/>Years<br/>Teaching<br/>Exp.</u> | <u>Beginning<br/>teachers %</u> | <u>1-5 years<br/>teaching<br/>experience<br/>%</u> | <u>% Students<br/>Econ Dis</u> |
|----------------------------------|--|---|---------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| State of Texas                   | 16.5%  | 10.9 years                                  | 8.1%                            | 27.3%  | 59%                            |
| KIPP Austin                      | 44.2%  | 3.7 years                                   | 25.3%                           | 51.0%  | 89.3%                          |
| Harmony Public Schools (Houston) | 40.6%  | 3.3   | 20.4%                           | 59.1%  | 59%                            |
| YES Prep (Houston)               | 27.7%  | 3.8 years                                   | 27.2%                           | 56.3%  | 83.2%                          |
| IDEA Public Schools (TX)         | 20.6%  | 2.4 yrs.                                    | 38.7%                           | 49%  | 89.1%                          |
| KIPP (San Antonio)               | 33.1%  | 3.6%  | 18.1%                           | 63.0%  | 59.0%                          |

*Source: Texas Education Administration 2015-2016 TAPR report*

Demographic and retention data from Texas NECMOs in comparison to the state averages shows some strong differences:

- All NECMOs within the table have higher teacher attrition rates than the state average of 16.5%, including two schools with attrition rates greater than 40%.
- All NECMOs within the table have at least a six-year gap in their years of teacher experience averages in comparison to the state average of 10.9 year



of teaching experience. No NECMO staff on this table has an average of more than four years teaching experience.

- The percentage of first year teachers at a school site is at least twice as high, and sometimes three times as high for NECMOs on this table in comparison to the state average of 8.1%.
- The percentage of teachers who are in their first five years of teaching is also greater for NECMO schools included on this table, in some cases twice as much as the state average of 27.3%

This data aligns with national data showing that NECMO teachers are more likely to have fewer years of teaching experience, (Cannata et al., 2012; Harris & Adams, 2007; Stuit & Smith, 2012). This experience gap matters because as previously noted the majority of teachers leave in either their earlier years of teaching or at retirement (Ingersoll, 2001a, 2001b). It remains unclear as to why CMOs (and most charters) tend to hire teachers with less experience. However, recent research shows that this may be based on the desire of CMO leadership to retain consistency in the delivery of instruction across all schools in a network (Whitman, 2008; Wilson, 2009), and thus hire teachers who do not demand as much autonomy as those with more teaching experience and who will take on the high expectations to fulfill the mission at NECMOS (Torres, 2015).

### ***NECMO gap theory—teacher undergraduate institution***

Research on teacher characteristics has shown that high levels of teacher academic achievement, whether that data is based on undergraduate institution, ACT scores or teacher certifications scores, has a high correlation with teacher attrition (Boyd et al., 2005; Goldhaber et al., 2007; Lankford et al., 2002; Murnane & Olsen, 1990; Podgursky et al., 2004). Given the research showing that PCS teachers come to the teaching profession from

more selective colleges than their TPS peers (Baker & Dickerson, 2006; Burian-Fitzgerald & Luekens, 2004), it is possible that PCS teachers are at a greater risk for attrition than TPS teachers. Although the percentage of teachers holding degrees from these more selective colleges is relatively small- 12% PCS teachers hold these degrees, vs. 8% for TPS teachers--the gap between these groups of teachers at each type of public school are still worth reviewing (Baker & Dickerson, 2006; Podgursky, 2006). In a study breaking down the causes in the gap between TPS and PCS teacher attrition the researchers did not find statistically significant findings when incorporating a “selective college” indicator (Stuit & Smith, 2012). However, these studies did not differentiate between NECMO teachers and stand alone charter school teachers, in studies that do make this modification the results are quite different. For example, research on six of the largest No Excuses charter schools in Boston found that: “Half of the six schools’ staff members had attended elite undergraduate institutions (*Barron’s* ‘most competitive’ rank), and fully 83 percent had attended at least a ‘very competitive’ college (*Barron’s* third-highest rank)” (Wilson, 2009, p. 5).

Although the teaching staff at these schools worked at schools in the Boston area that were affiliated with the “No Excuses” college preparatory philosophy, some of the schools were not part of larger CMO networks. However, this same study also reviewed data from eight “no excuses” charter schools outside of Boston and found that 77% of the teachers had attended “very competitive schools or better” (Wilson, 2009).

### ***NECMO gap theory-principal retention***

Research on principal longevity specifically at NECMOs is lacking but a review of recent analysis on principal longevity utilizing the 2007-2008 Schools and Staffing Survey and Principal Follow-up Survey shows that charter school principals as an entire cohort,

(not disaggregating for NECMOS) are 8.1% more likely to leave their schools than principals at TPSs (Ni, Sun, & Rorrer, 2014). Two other studies using the same national survey data set confirmed the TPS- PCS gap, showing that 20% of TPS principals left their campus as compared to 28% of charter school principals (Battle & Gruber, 2010), and that 71% of charter school leaders at 400 different schools expected to leave their job within five years (Ndoye, Imig, & Parker, 2010). When further comparing charter school principal retention to TPS retention, researchers in one Utah based study found that principals at TPSs remained at one school for 4.02 years compared to principals at charter schools who remained at schools for 2.95 years. This study also found varying rates of turnover in charter schools ranging from greater than 40% in some years to an average of 25.8%- both larger than the 20% annual principal turnover rate found in TPSs, (Sun & Yi, 2016).

Despite the clear gap between TPS and PCS principal retention, the exact causes for the gap remain broad. The 2014 study utilizing national SASS survey data found correlations between nearly half of its explanatory variables, “while unobserved factors and differential effects of the explanatory variables accounted for the remaining 51.18% of the gap” (Sun & Ni, 2015, p.169). The largest variable within the explained charter- TPS turnover gap was the presence of new teachers (three years experience or less) which accounted for 25% of the gap. Interestingly the second most explanatory variable in the study was the demographics of students at the principals’ schools. The variable “non white alone significantly explained close to 20% of the charter–TPS turnover gap” (Sun & Ni, 2015, p.171).

Although these studies did not differentiate for NECMOs one can hypothesize that the explanatory data trends for NECMO principal attrition may increase given the weight that the variables of new teachers and “non-white students” held in recent studies and given the large number of young teachers at NECMOs (Roch & Sai, 2016) as well as

their greater populations of students of color (Furgeson, Gill, Haimson, & Killewald, 2012; Lake, Dusseault, Bowen, Demeritt, & Hill, 2010). The finding that student demography, particularly non-white student demographics has a correlation to principal departure is not surprising given the prior research on the negative impact of school conditions at schools that serve these students (Hanushek et al., 2004; Lankford et al., 2002; Loeb, Kalogrides, & Horng, 2010) increasing teacher attrition.

However, the data on new teachers' negative impact on principal retention is a new data point that shows that charter schools and in particular NECMOs may have a unique challenge in improving teacher retention given their large numbers of new teachers and the previously noted evidence on the importance of an experienced principal on student achievement results. A brutal cycle may ensue where new teachers at a NECMO, with needs for additional coaching and support possibly push the principal to leave. If the principal is replaced new and veteran teachers may also leave which requires the new principal to hire again- and possibly hire inexperienced teachers which may further undermine the school's' student achievement and push the newest principal to leave as well. An additional key point from this research was that not only does principal turnover disproportionately impact schools with first year teachers, it also disproportionately impacts the turnover of high performing teachers (Béteille et al., 2012), (19% vs. 32% for teachers in a higher standard deviation of student achievement). This is challenging data for school management teams that are unable to retain principals and have a number of high performing teachers at a specific school. Multiple principal changes in a year or two could result in more than half the teachers departing a school in a few years.

The study's authors clearly describe this dilemma and the broader connection between principal retention and teacher retention at schools supporting students from low income backgrounds. In their research summary they write,

We find that principal turnover has negative effects on average achievement and particularly large negative effects on the achievement of students attending high poverty schools...and those with many first-year teachers...In sum, we find that principal turnover is positively associated with teacher turnover, particularly the turnover of more effective teachers, and negatively associated with student achievement. (Béteille et al., 2012, p. 905)

These researchers also determined that teacher turnover actually increases when a new principal takes over a school, with the likelihood of teachers leaving increasing by 18% during these years. Interestingly it does not matter if the new principal has experience or not, teacher attrition remains constant either way (Béteille et al., 2012). Although the results of these studies can likely be attributed to NECMOs it is important to consider some of the known factors that differentiate NECMOs as well as the individuals who choose to work at these schools before applying prior research covering all types of schools.

One example where previous research on principal attrition impacting teacher attrition may not be as applicable was a study that analyzed the types of schools that principals prefer to work in and thus the types of schools that they are also potentially more likely to leave. The researchers found that principals prefer schools with fewer minority and poor students, and would seek principal jobs in school districts or other schools with fewer students from these backgrounds (Loeb, Kalogrides, & Horng, 2010). This trend that does not match the preferences of NECMO administrators who often are attracted to their schools precisely because of the student demographics and mission of the school, (Doyle & Locke, 2014; Lake et al., 2010; Odden, Kelly, & CO-DIRECTORS, 2008). In fact in a 2014 study the authors found that charter schools would likely improve their recruitment of teachers if they focused on a recruitment pitch based on mission alignment rather than other factors such as salary (Shuls & Maranto, 2014).

One interesting data point concerning NECMOs is the lack of data on teacher attrition under a new principal at a new school. Since many NECMOs are growing the size

of their networks or school districts many principals are not only new, but the entire faculty and student body are also new. As of this writing there was little research on the principal retention at these types of NECMOs although given the challenges associated with starting a new school for founding principals the topic deserves consideration for future researchers.

In summary, there has been little research on the correlation between principal attrition and teacher attrition at NECMOs. However, research utilizing nationwide surveys on teacher and principal attrition analyzed by school type shows that charter schools as a whole have greater principal attrition than TPS. This attrition matters for two reasons: first, teachers, particularly new or skilled teachers, are more likely to leave when their principals are leaving and most importantly student achievement also falls when principals do not remain in their schools including in PCSs. Second, principal attrition in regards to teacher attrition is particularly important for NECMOs given the large populations of students from minority and low-income backgrounds at NECMOs and the increased likelihood of principal attrition from schools serving these students, not because of the students themselves but the conditions in the schools that serve these students.

#### **THE NECMO STAYERS—WHAT WE KNOW AND WHY WE SHOULD LEARN MORE**

Little research has been done on the challenge of determining why teachers decide to stay at their schools, particularly for specific stretches of time. It is true that much of the research on teacher leavers can be applied to the stayers. For example a school with a strong principal who creates a campus culture that promotes an improvement of teaching practice while simultaneously creating a safe space for teacher input in campus decision making will likely have an effect on teachers' decisions to remain with the school team and therefore not leave. Although the differences between “leavers” and “stayers” may seem

merely semantic there are merits to studying those teachers who elect to remain with their schools for extended time periods.

### **Why we should study the stayers at all schools**

A North Carolina study covering kindergarten through twelfth grade teachers showed that “teachers who left the profession were less effective than those who stayed at least five years” (Henry et al., 2011, p. 1). These findings align to prior research showing that teachers see greater gains in the achievement of their students from year one to two (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2006; Clotfelter et al., 2007; Goldhaber & Anthony, 2007; Kane et al., 2008; Rivkin et al., 2005), and from year two to year three (Boyd et al., 2006; Kane et al., 2008; Staiger & Rockoff, 2010). The North Carolina researchers noted that multiple studies “addressing teacher effects on student achievement indicate an emerging research consensus: Less effective teachers are more likely to exit the profession” (Henry, Bastian, & Fortner, 2011, p.13).

Given that new teachers are more likely to experience lower teacher efficacy and the increased likelihood of those teachers leaving the profession (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998), it would seem that teachers who choose to stay in the classroom have both greater student achievement results and greater efficacy than those who choose to leave before their fourth year of teaching. This timing in a teacher’s career when they are considering a return to the classroom for their third or fourth year is critical and is therefore a key component of the planning for this study that will be outlined in chapter three.

In addition to teachers who elect to remain in the profession generally having greater student achievement results and greater self-efficacy, the “stayers” have also usually had access to professional development opportunities and have had explicit support from both colleagues and administrators (Buchanan, Prescott, & Schuck, 2013). The time,

energy and financial resources that have been provided to improve the practice of these teachers would be forfeited by the district if they were to leave. Researchers have estimated that the cost to replace a novice teacher can range from \$10,000 to \$20,000 with greater costs for teachers with more experience due to the lost experience, knowledge and training that these teachers have (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007; Birkeland & Curtis, 2006).

Recent research has also shown that there are additional benefits to teachers remaining at a school as members of a common teaching team. For example a recent Texas based study found that school culture and ultimately student academic performance is weakened when schools experience a consistent “churn” of teachers and principals and are unable to establish consistent professional networks of support, cultural practices (Holme & Rangel, 2012), and relational trust across the school (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Guin, 2004). In other words, the whole of multiple teachers staying at a school is greater than the sum of its parts.

### **Why we should study the stayers at NECMOs**

As noted in chapter one NECMOs educate students who are disproportionately minority and in poverty,<sup>24</sup> while also generating strong academic outcomes for these students (Angrist & Pathak, 2013; M. Clark, Gleason, & Tuttle, 2015; Dobbie & Fryer Jr., 2013b; Fryer, 2011, 2014; Tuttle, Gill, Gleason, & Knechtel, 2013). These results have been recently studied at length in Boston where Angrist, Pathak, and Walters (2013) determined that the “No Excuses” charters in the city significantly increased student achievement results while also accounting for any causal effects from student admissions lotteries. Other similar studies in the Harlem Children’s Zone (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011a),

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<sup>24</sup> Furgeson, J., Gill, B., Haimson, J., Killewald, A., McCullough, M., Nichols-Barrer, I., . . . & Lake, R. (2012, January). *Charter-school management organizations: Diverse strategies and diverse student impacts*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, and Seattle, WA: The Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved from [http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/pdfs/education/cmo\\_final\\_updated.pdf](http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/pdfs/education/cmo_final_updated.pdf)



Chicago (Hoxby & Rockoff, 2004; Hoxby, Murarka, & Kang, 2009) and in Washington DC (Curto & Fryer, 2011) have shown similar results.

This trend in teacher effectiveness is impressive but also somewhat baffling given the low teacher retention rates exhibited by most NECMOs. Multiple studies have shown strong correlations between a campus culture with consistent staff members and a lack of teacher turnover and increased levels of student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Kersaint, Lewis, Potter, & Meisels, 2007). It seems that the NECMOs are achieving academic outcomes in spite of their high teacher retention, which begs the question what type of academic results could be created at these schools if they could retain a greater percentage of their teachers and do so year after year? Perhaps a better question is how can the lessons learned on retaining teachers at high performing NECMOs be applied to TPSs? Some researchers have shown that the price of higher student achievement results for students from low income backgrounds attending NECMOs has been the decreased levels of teacher autonomy (Torres, 2014), increased levels of expectations for student performance, and additional teacher hours (Wilson, 2009).

A broad study of more multiple NECMOs across the country has shown that ultimately the long hours and the demanding school cultures have been too much for teachers at NECMOs to maintain for long periods of time as evidenced by high turnover and that many of these organizations have not created long term solutions for their human capital needs- particularly as many plan to continuing growing (Lake et al., 2010). These schools need a teacher retention plan based on teacher attrition data, exit interviews and strong theory for teacher retention in order to continue to maintain the academic opportunities that they are generating for minority students from low-income backgrounds. They also need to understand what it is that they are doing that is generating success and inspiring, motivating and influencing their existing teachers to remain in the classroom

year over year. Here are some theories that may lead to building blocks for the creation of a NECMO teacher retention plan based on why teachers are sticking with their NECMO.

### **Theories on why teachers choose to stay in the classroom & NECMO classroom**

#### ***Theory of relational trust***

Given that principal turnover is greater at PCSs than at TPSs (Battle & Gruber, 2010) and that principal turnover is also strongly associated with teacher turnover and decreased student academic performance (Béteille et al., 2012), PCS principal retention is critical for PCS teacher retention. When principals take action to create strong positive organizational cultures focused on student achievement and they remain at those schools than student achievement can improve (Clark et al., 2009). Principals have also been credited with creating increased teacher retention rates through creating strong levels of trust between teachers and administrators (Allensworth et al., 2009) and principal credibility among teachers (Boyd et al., 2011). How a principal engages and leads teachers is therefore critical to maintaining a strong rate of teacher retention. This has certainly been the case at NECMOs.

Researcher Chris Torres (2016) has recently interviewed a number of teachers at NECMOs to determine what actions (or lack of actions as the case may be) on the part of principals contributed to teachers' decisions to leave their classrooms. Although he did not focus on those teachers who stayed at their schools, his findings are important in determining the factors that influenced teachers' decision making process. His findings show that relational trust is a critical input in teachers' decision making as to whether to remain with their schools or not. He utilizes Bryk and Schneider's definition of relational trust (2002), which he describes as: "An individual's understanding of their own and others' role obligations, the expectations the individual holds for these roles, and the

meaning they assign to social interactions based on these expectations” (Torres, 2016, p. 14).

Torres also and notes the importance of relational trust in research on teacher retention writing:

Yet relational trust is not typically used as a lens to study teacher turnover despite its impact on teachers’ satisfaction and sense of efficacy (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005). Therefore, the role the principal plays to influence relational trust and turnover in these growing school models [NECMOs] is of theoretical and practical interest, and the ways in which principals affect trust may be an underexplored contributor to high teacher turnover. (Torres, 2016, p.5)

His own research shows that the relational trust between teachers and principals at NECMOs is indeed a key component of teachers’ stay or go decisions. Torres utilized four criteria in evaluating the relational trust between teachers and principals; integrity, respect, competence, and personal regard and how it related to teachers’ career decisions” (2016, p. 20). All of these components clearly surfaced as areas where the teachers who left their schools felt that their principals and the school culture created by those principals did not align to at least one if not all four of the four criteria.

### ***Theory of reciprocity***

In addition to trust another potential cause of NECMO teacher departure is the stress teachers faced based on accountability requirements and student academic performance. Dr. Richard Elmore of the Harvard Graduate School of Education has extensively studied the impact of accountability on teacher mindsets and school culture. His theory of reciprocity is somewhat similar to Torres focus on relational trust, however Elmore takes the relationship a step further by incorporating accountability. Elmore notes that given the challenges of standardized testing and the federal requirements for Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) that schools and therefore principals are under intense pressure to

deliver academic achievement (2005). Teachers also feel this pressure as evident in a finding from a meta-analysis on the teacher retention literature that, “accountability policies might lead to increased attrition in low-performing schools.” (Guarino et al., 2006, p. 201).

Elmore observes that principals often pass the pressure of accountability onward towards teachers, but do so without providing teachers the capacity (e.g. training, observation and feedback, data analysis) to achieve their accountability goals, which he says is deeply problematic for principals, teachers and also for student achievement. He bases his theory of reciprocity around the need for principals to provide supports for teachers in order that they may then positively influence the outcomes dictated by accountability structures. Elmore’s theory of reciprocity therefore states:

I can only do as a teacher, what I know how to do. So your responsibility as a leader is to set the condition in place that permits me to have access to do the work that you, as a leader expect me to do. Likewise, your effectiveness as a leader depends in large part on your capacity to learn how to function at higher levels as an enabler of my learning and you do this in part by examining your own knowledge and skill as a leader based on your understanding of my practice as a teacher. (2005, p. 11)

The premise of the principal as teacher of teachers and builder of capacity has similarities to each of Torres’ four components of relational trust in particular competency and personal regard. In my own experience as a principal it was clear that teachers’ ability to deliver quality instruction increased after consistent and clear observation and feedback. This increase in teachers’ competency also per Elmore’s point reflected my own competency at increasing their teaching practice. Conceivably as the teachers whom I coached saw their instructional practice improve vis a vis their student achievement results so did their belief in my competency as a leader. To utilize Torres’ final criteria of personal regard, if I was able to provide this coaching while discussing and displaying a strong

personal regard for the teacher's body of work as an instructor (e.g. sincere praise, public recognition, remembering key personal events) than the relational trust that I had with that teacher would also increase.

Of course, both Torres and Elmore's theories can also work in the opposite manner as I have also found out. If teachers were not receiving support from me, or as Elmore puts it for me to work as an "enabler of their learning," than they often felt that I had let them down as their instructional leader and their relational trust in me and for that matter the school itself would suffer. I learned this the hard way as a considerable number of teachers at the school I led chose not to return leading to the many challenges associated with a churn of teaching talent. I will utilize both Torres' theory of relational trust and the four indices he utilizes as well as Elmore's theory of reciprocity in reviewing interviews I conduct with NECMO teachers. I will discuss in greater depth the use of these theories in Chapter Three.

## **CONCLUSION; IMPLICATIONS OF THE LITERATURE ON FUTURE RESEARCH**

The research literature shows us that there are multiple reasons why teachers leave their school or leave the profession of teaching. Some of these reasons for departure are often outside of the control of the school districts, such as the demographics of the teachers themselves- teacher age, years of teaching experience- or the amount of pay offered within the teaching profession. However other variables that have been proven to influence teacher retention are within the potential realm of control for school districts. These variables include hiring strong school leaders who generate relational trust, creating district environments where these leaders elect to stay with their schools (thus creating rationale for teachers to remain with their school as well), developing and adhering to school mission

statements, and creating opportunities to hire teachers from all backgrounds without focusing on elite undergraduate institutions.

As noted previously many NECMOs have actually already taken some action to improve those areas of their school districts that they feel will positively impact teacher retention. They have dedicated marketing efforts to trumpeting their clear mission statements, and have worked to recruit school leaders whom they feel will be able to build healthy work environments. In many ways the efforts of leadership at each NECMO appear to be exactly what current research is calling for. And yet, as I described earlier in this chapter, these efforts are falling short. I believe that these efforts are failing because researchers have not actually interviewed the stayers- those individuals who are electing to remain teaching at these schools. And make no mistake, this is a finite group of people.

We know that in many TPS districts five-year retention data is quite low. For example in Chicago Public Schools less than half of all teachers are still teaching after five years and many schools lose more than half of the teachers within a school building every three years....” (Allensworth et al., 2009). We also know that PCS district retention rates trail TPS district retention rates. At this time three and five-year retention rates for NECMOs are unavailable but given their current low annual retention rates one can posit that three and five year retention rates are also considerably lower. If a NECMO has a 45% departure rate (as was evident for some Texas NECMOs) for three years in a row it is quite possible that nearly all of those teachers who began three years earlier could have moved on to different schools or have left the teaching profession. Therefore, there are likely only a handful of teachers within individual NECMO schools who have remained with those schools for more than three or four years. These are the individuals that I intend to interview in order to learn what has worked to keep them in the classroom.

It is not enough to review exit surveys from teachers who have left the organization, or speak with rising school leaders who have left the classroom for administrative roles. Those teachers do have helpful insights into perhaps why teachers choose to leave or what is most appealing about leadership roles but they are not the experts that we should look to for teacher retention since they were actually not retained as classroom teachers. The importance of interviewing current stayers is echoed by NECMO researcher Chris Torres who writes,

Little research exists that examines teachers in these [NECMOs], especially how their perceptions of the school context influence their career decisions. Qualitative research on this topic is a necessary first step in building a deeper understanding of these issues.... Talking to “stayers” within the same school could be particularly important...(Torres, 2016, p. 35)

These stayers will hopefully be able to describe what organizational features are working for them in their classrooms and how the nuance of their school culture has convinced them that staying with the school is a worthwhile decision year over year. If themes develop across interviews with stayers in one school and potentially across multiple schools or even multiple NECMO networks the combined pattern could be quite revealing as to what is working for NECMO retention. I would argue that this data could be even more informative than information on teacher attrition and the reasons why people leave because it may provide a clear and already existing opportunity to scale initiatives that have worked to retain stayers at solitary schools and perhaps to build on pockets of success across multiple networks. District initiatives (e.g., teacher career pathways, increased autonomies based on experience) that have influenced stayers may emerge providing insight for NECMO leadership teams that may increase teacher retention and ultimately increased student achievement. Given the minority and low-income populations of students these schools often serve, and the churn of teachers that these students often experience, the

insights available through studying stayer teacher retention at NECMOs are worth studying.



### **Chapter 3: Research Methods**

The purpose of this study is to describe the factors that influence teachers' decisions to remain in their classroom teaching at "No Excuses" Charter Management Organizations (NECMOs). A secondary purpose of this study is to understand the ways that system level NECMO administrators can influence teachers' 'stay' or 'go' decision-making process through district level initiatives. These initiatives may include actions that influence school culture, school leadership hiring or firing, and/or the implementation of central strategies such as adjustments in salary, implementation of teacher career pathways, or other unknown initiatives that may surface through the course of this research.

As noted in chapter two, the existing research on NECMO teacher retention is relatively sparse, with the majority of studies focused on quantitative data sets from the SPSS national survey. These studies are helpful in identifying broad trends in teacher retention data, but they do not provide researchers with insights into why teachers choose to stay at their schools and what specific factors cause them to do so. This type of insight requires qualitative research, research with an interest in, "understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 2009, p. 13).

The context of a NECMO teaching environment provides a unique teaching world and I believe the experiences of teachers there are worth examining in detail and in multiple schools. This study will therefore utilize qualitative constructivist multi- case study methodology in order to better understand teachers' meaning making in NECMOs, and will specifically focus on why some teachers elect to stay with their school over time. Based on my knowledge it will be the first study of its kind in this environment. To date there have been fewer qualitative charter school teacher retention studies than quantitative

studies and those studies that have utilized qualitative data have rarely focused explicitly on NECMOs. In addition, the few studies that have focused on teacher attrition at NECMOs have been driven by interviews with teacher leavers (Torres, 2014, 2016). That research, although very compelling and innovative, does not focus on the teacher stayers and their rationale. Therefore in this study I will address the need for a qualitative analysis of NECMO stayers given the nuance of the NECMO context and the many ways teachers engage with that context. I will simultaneously close a gap in the research with a study focused explicitly on NECMO teacher stayers and their rationale for remaining with their students and school.

The study will address the following research questions. These questions will guide the process for data collection and analysis:

1. How do teachers make meaning of their decisions to stay in their teaching position at NECMO charter schools?
2. How do teachers make sense of district level NECMO retention initiatives in their decision to stay teaching at their school?

In this chapter I describe the study design, samples, data collection methods and analytic process for this research. In order to set context for the qualitative methodology for this study I also outline the background, methodology, and qualitative multi-case study analysis.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

Qualitative researcher Tracy (2012) notes that one of the advantages of a qualitative research study is that data can “provide insight into cultural activities that might otherwise be missed in structured surveys or experiments” (p. 5). It is this insight into cultural activities described by Tracy that is needed in research on NECMO teacher retention,

specifically given the specific teaching culture that takes place within the walls of a NECMO school. NECMO practitioners have utilized teacher exit surveys that provide quantitative data for analysis on leavers and researchers have reviewed national data sets to determine causes for teacher departure at a broad level (Roch & Sai, 2016). However, there have been few qualitative studies that access the exact factors that influence teachers in their decision making process, especially the factors that contribute to a “stay” decision. This study will seek to learn those factors and will do so through a qualitative multi case study analysis.

This method is appropriate because the focus of qualitative research is on clarifying and understanding the meaning making and sense making of participants. Qualitative researcher Merriam (2012) describes qualitative research as providing the researcher with knowledge to which we would not otherwise have access” (p. 46). In this case that access is knowledge about how teachers at NECMO schools make stay or go decisions and how NECMO leaders work to influence these decisions towards teacher retention. It is was my hope that by utilizing a case study framework for this research I would be able to “document infrequent, non obvious, or counterintuitive occurrences that may be missed by standard statistical or (empirical) approaches...” (Abramson, 1992, p. 190).

Within the qualitative framework I used an interpretivist or constructionist framework as “the interpretive paradigm suggests that is it absolutely necessary to analyze social action from the actors’ standpoint” (Tracy, 2013. p. 41). In this instance the vantage point is that of NECMO teachers. Interpretivism is fitting for this study focused on teacher interviews, as it is the teachers’ point of view regarding their decision to stay or remain teaching at a NECMO that will make up the most important and compelling data points in this study.

The interpretive or constructivist approach is also aligned to my own experience as a school teacher and principal within a NECMO. The constructivist approach is one that assumes no singular reality, but rather that there are multiple interpretations of a common event (Merriam, 2009). In my experience as a NECMO teacher and principal it was quite common for teachers and school administrators to observe the same cultural event at a NECMO school and in turn construct their own learning and meaning from that event. For example, a conversation between a teacher and a principal on student achievement results in the teacher's classroom could be seen as either supportive or threatening to the teacher depending on the construction of the event by each party.

An additional reason why I used a qualitative multi-case study analysis for this research was the ability to learn participant perspectives within the specific case study context. In this case, I focused on the perspectives of teachers and the school principal within the context of their school environment. Qualitative researcher Robert Yin describes case study research as, "An empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon, (the case) in depth and within its real-world context" (2017, p. 16). Merriam's definition of the case study is similar; she describes case study research as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (2009, p. 40). Both of these descriptions utilize real world context or a bounded system as a key portion of the definition. The importance of the boundaries of the case study aligns to this research via a very specific context for education- NECMO schools, their hallways, classrooms, offices and playgrounds. The environment of these schools and engagement that teachers within them have with their peers, their students and the families within this environment has an impact on their stay or go decision making process. In this research study the conditions experienced by teachers within their NECMO school context ultimately impacted their relationship with the school and thus their decision to stay or leave their teaching role. It

was therefore critical that I understood how teachers engaged with their environment in negative or positive ways and how the engagement with that context shaped their decision around staying or going.

Teachers are constantly making meaning within their school context. Each day at school brings opportunities for positive or negative impressions of their work and making meaning from these experiences. The key question is what are the experiences that most explicitly have a positive or negative impact on teachers' stay or go decision? Key contextual experiences for teachers may come through direct teaching, engaging with students, or working side by side with colleagues. There are few shortages of meaning making opportunities in a school environment, or times throughout the school day where teachers are not pushed to make sense of what is happening in the world around them. Teachers make sense of the world around them when they observe decision-making processes from school administrators around student discipline, suspensions and expulsions. They interpret the norms of their working environment when they see what behaviors or outcomes such as student test scores, student behavior and/ or student happiness are recognized and awarded by school leaders. Indeed, from the smallest change in how an 8th grader takes notes in algebra to the most bureaucratic of campus faculty meetings teachers are building their understanding of their school's operating norms and culture. This matters because each of these moments and impressions will ultimately lead toward each teacher's decision to leave or stay with their school team.

Another reason why I employed a qualitative multi case study analysis for this research is that the framework provides an opportunity to inform the researcher based on multiple cases. This multi case or in this instance multi-school perspective is important as it has substantial analytic benefits over a one case method (Yin, 2014). The multi case perspective allowed me to compare the NECMO practices and teacher responses within

different NECMO networks and schools while considering trends and differences across networks. For example, prior research has shown that NECMO teachers often work longer hours than teachers at TPSs (Torres, 2014), which some researchers have suspected leads to increased NECMO attrition due to burnout (Lake et al., 2010). By incorporating multiple schools from different school networks, I was able to determine that burnout and other factors were occurring across multiple networks within the NECMO community and how variations in local NECMO policies and practices were and were not shaping teachers' decisions. A multi-case perspective also allowed me to apply a theoretical model (Yin, 2014) where I could compare the results from different interviews within one network to another in order to better answer my research question regarding how district level NECMO retention initiatives impact teachers' decisions to stay. By comparing the perspectives of teachers across schools I was able to discern which particular "school moments" had the strongest impact on the stayers' rationale to remain at the school and how teachers made meaning across NECMOs in the same and different ways.

As I will describe in the discussion on sampling (below), for this research each case included multiple actors, including both teachers, and the case school principal and a NECMO district administrator. Yin (2014) notes that case studies provide the opportunity to focus on a specific phenomenon involving multiple actors. This made that method appropriate for this study, I therefore utilized the data from interviews with teachers and principals and district leaders to better understand how the same context of the school was viewed from the different perspectives that each of these actors brought. I also specifically wanted to learn how the perspective on district level teacher retention initiatives varied across the leadership levels within the school context, which certainly bore out in the findings. For example the district administrators leading teacher retention initiatives had a considerably more positive view of the teacher retention initiatives' impact on teacher

decision making than the respective teachers within the school case studies who were not as invested in the various district level retention initiatives as will be noted in chapter seven. By interviewing multiple actors at different levels within the school context multiple perspectives on the same school phenomenons and events were able to surface.

The study was also cross sectional because the study was conducted over a short window of time with interviews taking place with central office administrators and two of the principals during July and August (teachers were on vacation and then in trainings during that time). All of the nine teachers and one principal were interviewed between August 31<sup>st</sup> and September 21<sup>st</sup>, which depending on the time of the interview and the school's specific calendar placed the teacher interview from between twenty to fifty days into the 2017-2018 school year. I felt that this was an appropriate time for the interviews to take place given that the teachers had obviously made their decisions to return for the 2017-2018 school year and had now had some time to appreciate the appropriateness of their decision given their current mindset on teaching at their respective NECMOs. My hypothesis seemed to be accurate in that teachers had made their decision to return relatively recently in the late spring of 2017 and had also experienced enough teaching in their new year to color their remarks at the interviews with rationale as to whether their decision to stay at their school had been a good one or not.

## **SAMPLES**

Data collection for this study took place in three different schools, each located within a different NECMO school district within the same large Texas city. Each of the participating schools was a part of a NECMO district with schools located in multiple cities across the state of Texas. Each NECMO selected also serves at least 15,000 students in total across the state and each has plans to increase the number of students enrolled. This

level of scale in overall student population is important to note for this study since prior research has shown that larger NECMOs have greater challenges in execution of district wide initiatives than smaller NECMOs (Lake et al., 2010). Selecting larger NECMO organizations was also important in the event that if findings from the study prove to be worth replicating, then TPS urban districts that serve even larger student populations may view the findings as analogous or even actionable within their school systems.

### **School Selection Criteria**

I selected the school research sites for this study using four specific criteria, all of which needed to align for a school to be selected. The first criterion was student demographics, specifically socioeconomic status, and race. As noted in chapter one NECMOs traditionally serve a very specific demographic of students including students who are often from minority backgrounds and from low income households as defined by federal guidelines for receiving a free or reduced-price lunch.

My aim in this study was for the selected schools<sup>25</sup> to at minimum match national NECMO demographics where 71% of students in a school are from low income backgrounds and on average 91% of students in a CMO are African-American or Latino-Hispanic (Furgeson et al., 2012). This was important since I hoped to provide recommendations through this study on specific practices that could benefit both NECMO schools and TPSs who serve students from these backgrounds. It was therefore critical to find school sites that had student populations that were majority low income and majority African American and/ or Latino Hispanic as these are the student groups that research has

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<sup>25</sup> All of the student and educator data utilized in selecting schools will be obtained through the publicly available Texas Education Agency (TEA) annual Texas Accountability Performance Report (TAPR) data. This data set includes performance and demographic information on all public schools in the state of Texas including public charter schools.



shown have disproportionately been the most affected by teacher churn (Goldhaber et al., 2015; E. Hanushek et al., 2004).

As noted previously in chapter two the churn of teachers and school leaders at these schools serving low income and minority students leads to lower student achievement results at the school experiencing this churn than at schools with a consistent teaching staff (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Guin, 2004; Holme & Rangel, 2012). If insights into teacher retention and teacher stayers were to be gained through this research I wanted them to be based on schools serving student populations that have the most to gain in their learning-potentially through the presence of a more consistent teaching staff in front of them.

Alas, finding three NECMO school districts and schools within them that met both the district criterion of scale at 15,000 students within the state and the school criteria for student demographics and the criteria of serving a district student population made up greater than 71% percent low income students proved to be challenging. I was able to find two school districts and schools within them that met the bar for student population scale and low-income student percentage, and one school district that met the bar for scale across the state of Texas, but with the school having a student population of 54.% low-income students, rather than 71%.

The second criteria for school site selection in the study was Texas school accountability rating, specifically state academic distinctions. For the purposes of this study I wanted to research schools that were meeting the academic proficiency standard as measured by the TEA while receiving differing amounts of Texas campus distinctions. I chose this approach based on research noted in chapter two showing that teacher retention can in part be driven by academic performance, and that academic performance can in turn influence teacher retention. I sought to include schools in the study with varying school

performance while adhering to what I deemed to be the state’s minimal binary academic standard.

The first level of school performance differentiation available in Texas is a school’s status of either “Met Standard” or “Improvement Required”. During the 2016-2017 year 95.3% of Texas schools achieved the “Met Standard” rating<sup>26</sup>. Given that the great majority of schools in the state met this rating and that to have not met the rating indicates a likely high level and potentially high variety of destabilizing factors (e.g. student attendance, safety, school finances), I sought to only include schools in the study that met this rating. I did however seek to include schools with a variance in academic performance as measured by the more granular state indicator of achievement of academic distinctions.

Texas schools with students in tested subject areas are eligible for between four and seven distinctions depending on the number of grade levels served at the school. Distinctions are awarded for academic merit across science, social studies, math and English as well as postsecondary readiness, closing “Top 25% Closing Performance gaps,” and “Top 25% student progress.”<sup>27</sup> Last year 51% of schools had at least one distinction, but only 4.5%<sup>28</sup> met all distinctions for which they were eligible. I was able to select schools for the study that had met seven of seven distinctions, six of seven distinctions and three of seven distinctions in order to provide some variance around student academic performance among the schools in the study.

The third criterion was teacher retention data. Research has shown that teacher attrition on a campus can spur further teacher attrition. In order to better understand why stayers choose to stay at their campuses I selected schools for the study that had high levels

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<sup>26</sup> [2017 Accountability Rating System - Texas Education Agency](https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/perfreport/account/2016/highlights.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> <https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/perfreport/account/2016/highlights.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> <https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/perfreport/account/2016/highlights.pdf>

of teacher retention as compared to other NECMOs and to TPSs. This was an important criteria and proved challenging given the average teacher retention rates across the larger NECMOs in Texas.

It was also challenging to select these schools since Texas does not provide school specific teacher attrition data. This data is only collected at the district level presenting a challenge in researching large NECMOs like the ones in this study who have schools located across multiple cities. I was able to ascertain campus specific teacher retention data through initial conversations with the school district retention initiative leaders. These leaders were then able to guide me towards a specific campus to study that fit the criteria I described. Retention data for the largest Texas NECMO districts in the state ranged from 55.8% to 79.4% the year before this study. The statewide retention rate for the same time period is 83.6%<sup>29</sup>. Based on data derived from school district leaders which was corroborated by the principals, I was able to select specific schools with teacher retention rates of 95% (Queen Public Schools, Lion College Prep), 89% (Eagle Public Schools, Angel College Prep), and 90% (Taylor Public Schools, Parker College Prep)

The fourth and final criterion for this study was evidence of both the school's inclusion—whether self-assigned or as noted by other organizations- as being a part of the “No Excuses” charter school movement and of having at least one current concrete district level teacher retention initiative. I was looking to include charter schools that belong to networks that explicitly utilized the term “No Excuses.” I was also looking for a focus on college completion and serving students from low income backgrounds in the descriptions of their school on their website or within other marketing efforts. Schools were also selected based on public teacher retention initiatives either posted on school websites, or

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<sup>29</sup> Texas Education Agency, Texas Annual Performance Report 2015-2016

discussed by district level leadership, although the clarity and emphasis on these initiatives varied from school network to school network.

### **Respondent Selection**

As noted earlier there has been expansive research done on teacher leavers and even some research completed on teacher leavers from NECMOs. This research however, focused on teacher stayers requiring teachers who were committed to staying in the classroom. For this study I interviewed educators at three schools each belonging to a different NECMO. Within each school I interviewed three teachers, the school principal and the district level leader of teacher retention. I interviewed teachers who were planning on returning to teach (not leave the classroom) at their same school. Interviewing teachers who committed to returning to teach at their school was critical as these individuals formed the key premise for the study- a focus on the “stayers”. In addition to selecting only those teachers who were committed to return to teach in the 2017-2018 school year I was also able to select teachers who had been with their school for at least three or more years. Research shows that teacher efficacy continues to rapidly increase through year three (Boyd et al., 2006; Kane et al., 2008; Staiger & Rockoff, 2010), and that student achievement results for teachers who remain teaching for five years are greater than those who leave sooner (Henry et al., 2011). Due to the current attrition of teachers within NECMOs in the research city along with the relative newness of the schools being researched, finding teachers who had taught for five years at the same school was challenging. However I was able to select teachers with at least three years experience at each case study site including one teacher who had taught for twenty-four years. See table four for teacher background and experience.

Table 4: Teacher Background and Experience

| <u>School</u>      | <u>Name<br/>(pseudonym)</u> | <u>Total Years<br/>teaching<br/>experience</u> | <u>Years teaching<br/>Experience at<br/>NECMO</u> | <u>Grade Level &amp;<br/>Content</u>                          |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|--|---|---|
| Angel College Prep | Steve                       | 7  | 5   | Special Education (10 <sup>th</sup> & 11 <sup>th</sup> grade) |
| Angel College Prep | Mary                        | 6  | 4   | 8 <sup>th</sup> grade English                                 |
| Angel College Prep | Gabrielle                   | 6  | 6   | 9 <sup>th</sup> grade Spanish                                 |
| Lion College Prep  | Stacy                       | 4  | 4   | Special Education (5 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> grade)    |
| Lion College Prep  | Eve                         | 8  | 4   | 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade English                                 |
| Lion College Prep  | Lee                         | 24   | 9   | Physical Education (5-8 <sup>th</sup> grade)                  |
| Parker Academy     | Libby                       | 7  | 4   | Libby   |
| Parker Academy     | Jenny                       | 12   | 7   | Jenny   |
| Parker Academy     | Lacy                        | 5  | 3   | Lacy  |

*Source: Self-reported teacher interviews*

In addition to the teacher selection criterion of three-year stayers I was looking to find teachers who were teaching in middle school grade levels in state of Texas tested subject areas. I focused on teachers in the middle school grades given the greater attrition rates for middle school teachers over high school teachers (Carter & Carter, 2000). I felt that these higher middle school teacher attrition rates combined with the fact that NECMO middle schools traditionally launch with grades five or six merits a focus on these grade levels that will benefit future research on NECMOs particularly those that are more nascent in their growth.

All teachers interviewed taught middle school subjects except for one teacher at Angel College Prep who taught 9<sup>th</sup> grade Spanish and another who taught high school

special education. I wanted to focus on teachers teaching tested subject areas as the pressures of the state accountability system are potentially magnified at NECMOs given their proclivity for high levels of data analysis (Dobbie & Fryer Jr., 2013a; Fryer, 2014), and that these pressures could potentially drive teacher departures.

I also interviewed the campus principal at each participating school site in order to better understand the contextual conditions taking place at that school and the proactive and reactive teacher retention efforts taking place at the school. Research shows that more than most other factors the school leader has the strongest ability to influence teacher retention (Allensworth et al., 2009; Boyd et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2011). This ability to influence stems in part from personal engagement and relationships with teachers particularly at NECMOs (Torres, 2016), but also from the principal's ability to create the cultural context of the school environment (Allensworth et al., 2009). For example if a principal tolerates student misbehavior on a consistent basis the cultural context for teaching shifts from one of order and accountability to one where student misbehavior can lead to teacher stress and potentially initiate teacher departure. Conversely a principal can establish and foster a learning environment where students are rewarded and praised through school wide initiatives leading to a learning context that is pleasant for teachers and potentially leads to greater teacher retention. Since the interviews for this study took place in the early fall principals were able to reflect on the effectiveness of their teacher retention initiatives and campus climate based on the number of teachers who returned to teach that year. After multiple interviews with teachers across all school sites it became apparent that there was a considerable gap between principal perceptions of teacher meaning making and teachers' actual meaning making process around their decision to stay on at the campus. These findings are noted in the chapter seven.

Finally in order to best understand the district level perspective I also interviewed one district level leader from each NECMO. These were leaders who supported NECMO teacher retention initiatives at the school site as well as schools across the research city and the state depending on the NECMO's leadership structure. Inclusion of these district level leaders was critical in order to best understand their perception of teacher meaning making and how that perception influenced the programs that they led. Like the principals, there was a considerable gap between the district level administrators' understanding of teacher meaning making and the meaning making of the teachers themselves. This finding is also discussed in chapter seven.

## **DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

The main method for data collection for this research was done through in person semi-structured interviews in the research city. I also utilized data from participating NECMOs' websites, teacher career pathway materials and plans provided both publicly online and also through NECMO district leadership. Online teacher recruitment materials were also reviewed to better understand each NECMO's approach to teacher retention from its first engagement with teacher applicants. As noted previously I also obtained district level and school level student and teacher demographic data and student achievement results through publicly available data via the TEA website.

### **Participant selection**

In order to obtain access to case study participants I emailed central office leaders whom I anticipated were involved in district level retention initiatives as noted per NECMO websites and my own personal and professional networks within the NECMO community. Once email contact has been made with district leadership I then emailed a

formal access proposal to the district level teacher retention leader and requested a phone conversation to review the purposes of the study, explain the requirements for participation and to review privacy agreements for all participants. I was fortunately able to have this conversation with each district level leader. They also each agreed to have their respective NECMO in the study. As noted previously, they were then able to introduce me to the school principal in their NECMO who led a school with a high teacher retention rates as compared to the state and NECMO averages within the state. Each of these district leaders provided me with an introduction to the appropriate principal and I was then able to communicate with each school principal in order to: 1) explain the purpose of the study, 2) determine their willingness to engage in the endeavor, and 3) determine if there were teachers at the school that met the previously noted teacher criteria of three years experience ideally in a middle school tested subject area.

Thankfully all three principals were willing to participate in the study and all of them believed that they had at least three teachers at their school that not only met the criteria for the study but would also be willing to participate. In some schools the number of teachers meeting all three criteria was quite small given the low numbers of teacher stayers with three years' experience. For example, at Angel College Prep I had to interview high school teachers in order to find teachers with the requisite experience. This was not the case at Lion College Prep or at Parker Academy, but both of those schools did have much smaller teacher populations to select participants from once each of the criteria for the study had been met.

Given the small number of available teachers meeting the criteria I provided school principals latitude in determining which teachers who fit the criterion they anticipate would be most willing to engage in the study and therefore to approach for participation. Principals did just that and each provided me with a brief email introduction or the email



addresses to three teachers at their school whom they felt met the criteria. After receiving each teacher's contact information, I called them to explain the purpose of the study and the parameters of our time together during the interview. I then emailed each teacher requesting an interview and asking that they let me know when I might be able to interview them at their school. This email contained the IRB approval letter, a research consent form, as well as the interview questions. (See Appendix A for sample email, consent form, and interview questions). I made 11 interview requests, two originally scheduled teachers were unable to interview, but the school principal was able to help me find new teachers at the school that met the study's criteria.

### **Interview context and method**

As noted previously all participants were interviewed between late July and mid-September 2017. Administrator interviews were conducted before teacher principal interviews, in order to better inform my understanding of specific district level teacher initiatives, and principal interviews were conducted before teacher interviews. I interviewed three teachers at each case study school as well as the school principal and the NECMO district level leader leading the NECMO's teacher retention initiative(s) for a total of 15 interviews across three NECMOs. Based on Merriam's analysis that the number of participants in a study should be contingent on the data being gathered, resources at hand and the ability to answer the research questions being posed (2009) I felt that this number of interviews would provide enough content to discern trends within case study school and across the three cases. Table 5 notes the number of teachers, school principals, and district level teacher administrators interviewed at each school site participating in the case study.

Table 5: Data collection by Case—Number of Interviews

| <u>CASE STUDY</u>                               | <u>TOTAL PARTICIPANTS</u>   | <u># INTERVIEWS</u>  |
|---|---|--|
| Eagle Public Schools; Angel College Preparatory | 5- 3 teachers, 1 school principal, 1 central office administrator leading teacher retention initiative. | 5 individual interviews (3 individual teacher interviews, 1 principal interview, 1 central office administrator interview) |
| Queen Public Schools; Lion College Prep         | 5- 3 teachers, 1 school principal, 1 central office administrator leading teacher retention initiative. | 5 individual interviews (3 individual teacher interviews, 1 principal interview, 1 central office administrator interview) |
| Taylor Public Schools; Parker Academy           | 5- 3 teachers, 1 school principal, 1 central office administrator leading teacher retention initiative. | 5 individual interviews (3 individual teacher interviews, 1 principal interview, 1 central office administrator interview) |

All interviews whether with administrators or teachers were done with a semi-structured process based on a set of guiding questions. This format allowed me to ask specific follow up questions during the interview (Merriam, 2009), while still adhering to the interview protocol. I began interviews by reviewing the consent form, and the IRB letter from the University of Texas at Austin noting the importance of participants' anonymity in the study. I then provided participants with a paper copy of the interview questions, the same questions that had been previously emailed to the participant. Interviews were generally 60 minutes, with some as long as 75 minutes and others as short as 40 minutes.

Teacher interviews were focused on the teachers' decision-making process around their decision to stay with or leave their current school site. I also asked teachers to describe their awareness of various NECMO teacher retention initiatives and their engagement with

these initiatives. Principal and central office administrators were asked to describe their awareness of and engagement with (or if relevant in their explicit role) in district level teacher retention initiatives. Principals and district level leaders were asked how they considered teacher decision-making and what factors they believed to be most influential in this process. Interview and questions can be found in Appendix A.

Six teacher interviews took place in teachers' classrooms either after school or during a conference period. Two teacher interviews were conducted at coffee shops per each teacher's request and one took place in a school courtyard. Interviews with principals and central office administrators took place in their respective offices. I recorded all interviews using a digital recorder in order to transcribe the audio recordings to text for coding and data analysis.

## **ANALYSIS**

In my data analysis process, I worked to understand any patterns in teacher meaning making around their retention decision both within each case study and across case studies through cross case analysis. I also sought to understand how those decisions were shaped by the policies and practices that both principals and district level leaders had in place to positively impact teacher retention at their respective NECMO. In order to understand these trends in participant responses I utilized an ongoing iterative process of data analysis that allowed me to make meaning of my findings both in and outside of the field (Merriam, 2009). Merriam outlined best practices for multiple case study analysis, which I sought to follow in my analysis. She writes,

In a multiple case study, there are two stages of analysis- the within case analysis and the cross-case analysis. For the *within-case analysis*, each case is first treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself. Data are gathered so the researcher can learn as much about the contextual variables as possible

that might have a bearing on the case. Once the analysis of each case is completed, *cross case analysis* begins...In a multiple case study, a within-case analysis is followed by a cross-case analysis. (2009, p. 204, 205)

In this study I used the multi case study analytic approach that Merriam describes by focusing my analytic efforts on one case or NECMO school at a time. For the most part I was able to complete interviews with the district leader, the school principal and then the three teachers in order at one school before moving onto the next. Given the variability of the administrator's schedules I did have to interview some district leaders before completing the interviews with all teachers at one school site. However, I feel that the spirit of Merriam's approach was preserved, as I was able to focus my time and energy on one school site at a time before moving completely onto the next one.

During and after each interview I recorded notes using a precoding technique to capture key comments that I considered to have potential as a pattern within each case study (Saldana, 2013). Examples of precoding themes included observations on teachers' key factors in making a retention decision such as their colleagues, or descriptions of their school principal's effectiveness. Once I completed an interview and my precoding notes I had the interview transcribed by the University of Texas transcription service. When I received the transcribed file I then reviewed the transcription and in conjunction with my notes from the interview looked for any themes that I may have missed during the initial interview. I then updated my notes adding any key themes that emerged upon my review of the transcription.

Once I had completed a review of the transcription I then turned my attention to the next interview for the school case study site and repeated the process. I did this in order, starting with the administrator and then moving to the principal and to the teachers. For example, I first read my interview notes and then the transcript from the district level administrator at Eagle Public Schools followed by the interview notes and transcript from

the campus principal at Angel College Prep within Eagle Public Schools and then reviewed the interview notes and transcripts from the three staying teachers at Angel College Prep. In most instances I was actually able to receive the transcript from the prior interview and review it before completing the next interview, thus providing me an additional review of the prior interview before embarking on the next one.

This was important as given this timeline I was able to incorporate another practice from Merriam of “identifying segments in my data collection that are responsive to my research questions. I defined a segment as a “unit of data which is a potential answer or part of an answer to the questions being asked in the study (2009, p. 176.) Examples of segments within my data collection included specific remarks from a teacher during an interview on how their direct manager influenced their decision to stay on for another year and specific comments on the importance of their teaching teammates on their retention decision.

Upon reviewing the final transcript from the last interview, I then gathered themes from my notes within the specific case study. I noted themes, e.g. importance of one’s colleagues on retention decisions, as well as specific quotations- “The mission brought me to this school”, and specific details, e.g. years teaching the same content area. I combined this information in a Microsoft Word document set up in outline format. This process allowed me to add quotations or specific information within a broader theme. For example under the theme of the importance of teacher managers impact on teachers’ meaning making I was able to add specific quotes within the word document outline and consistent language describing the importance of teacher managers.

Using this technique I was able “to construct categories or themes that capture some recurring patterns that cut across the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 181). Assigning these categories was an iterative process with themes continuing to surface as I reviewed

interview transcripts and notes taken during those interview sessions. I used Merriam's five criteria for category construction: One, a category should be responsive to providing an answer to a research question; two, it should be exhaustive- all data should fit within all of the categories; three, it should be mutually exclusive; four it should be sensitized or named descriptively; and five, it should be conceptually congruent (2009). Upon completion of each case study I had between twelve to fifteen themes that were mentioned by at least one teacher as influencing their meaning making process. Examples of recurring meaning making themes across the three teachers in case study one at Angel College Prep in the Eagle Public Schools NECMO included, a dependable manager, principal effectiveness, belief in the schools mission and student relationships. (See Appendix B for data from individual case study analysis.)

In addition to these emic categories that were driven by themes within participant responses I also incorporated etic coding based on two potential theories. (1) I reviewed responses for references aligned to Elmore's theory of reciprocity (2005) describing teacher training and accountability support within teachers' meaning making. (2) I also considered Torres' theory of relational trust (2016) between teachers and principals and looked for connections to his theory amid participants' responses. Elmore's theory did not appear as often as I anticipated, but Torre's theory on relational trust although not always mentioned verbatim was prevalent in the teacher responses when describing their positive relationships with their direct manager (Chapter 4) or principal (Chapter 5). With the three separate case studies complete I began cross case analysis and compared the findings from each separate case searching for answers to my two research questions across all three case studies and the fifteen interviews they encompassed.

I analyzed patterns in teachers' responses across the three case studies in three ways. First, I reviewed what themes they mentioned in their interviews as having an impact

on their meaning making process when deciding to return to their teaching role or to leave. Second, I reviewed data from each teacher's interview in response to an explicit question on the top factors that influenced each teacher's decision to remain or leave their teaching role. Third I highlighted themes that were clearly most important to individual teachers even if those responses did not conform to patterns of responses across the three case study sites.

I then combined the themes from each teacher's response into a table that allowed me to determine trends across teachers across all case studies. For example, a theme that was noted by all three teachers at a school was assigned a value of three for that school, themes that were noted by one teacher at a school were assigned a value of one for that school. I then took this information and compared it across each case study and was able to determine themes that not only had a high number of teachers identifying it, but also themes that were mentioned (or not mentioned) at each school site. This allowed me to determine not only the number of teachers that mentioned the theme in total but also whether or not the theme was represented across each case study. See Appendix B for themes represented across all case studies.

### **Validity and reliability**

This study established validity through a number of commonly utilized strategies for qualitative research; triangulation, member checks, reflexivity, and peer review. By utilizing these strategies, I hoped to establish credibility for my findings (Merriam, 2009). The first strategy for validation within the study was triangulation. I used triangulation by "tacking back and forth between the different components of the design" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 3). For example, I compared my interview notes with staying teachers' NECMO district materials on teacher career pathways while also comparing information from both sources

with interview notes from the district level NECMO administrator. By doing this I was able to encounter patterns in data so that interpretations were supported by more than one source of data or subject (Patton, 2002). In analyzing patterns in the data and generating explanations for them, I was able to simultaneously look for disconfirming evidence and alternative themes to enhance the external validity of the study (Yin, 2003). For example, although the district administrator and principal at one school site repeatedly noted the importance of the dog policy on campus in teachers' meaning making on retention decisions, this theme did not surface in teacher responses.

One way in which I searched for disqualifying evidence was through the strategy of member checks. Member checks or respondent validation are executed through the creation of a feedback loop where the researcher returns to individuals he or she previously interviewed and asks them to comment on the whether the interviewer's understanding of what was discussed is accurate. Although I was not able to execute this strategy with all interview participants I was able to connect with participants at the first school site and was able to discuss themes that were emerging in my research process. Administrators and teachers from this school validated the themes I had identified to date, which provided me with some key insights moving forward into the next case study.

An additional strategy I used in my research was reflexivity or, "the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher" (Merriam, 2009, p. 219; Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p.183). Some participants knew that I was an administrator at a charter school. I was therefore careful to provide clear examples of how anonymity would be preserved for all participants in the study and that I was not there to expose their theories or ideas on retention to their principal nor peers. One of the ways that I did this was by noting some of my own meaning making processes at the interviews given my experience as a NECMO teacher and principal. I also made it clear that in these interviews I was a researcher first



and an administrator second. This communication of reflexivity has become increasingly important for qualitative researchers to establish at the onset of research (Merriam, 2009) and it was certainly the case for myself given my background with NECMOs.

### **Reflexivity**

As a former NECMO teacher and principal I realized that even with clearly communicated purpose and rationale that educators will form varied perspectives on the events occurring in their school. I wanted to be able to utilize my experiences as a NECMO teacher and leader to better comprehend the various perspectives that different NECMO actors bring to their work. I have experienced the frustration of a 6th grade lesson gone awry as well as a faculty meeting dissolving into dissent and confusion. Rather than completely remove those experiences, this research utilized the concept of “virtuous subjectivity” utilizing these experiences as a “strength on which I build” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 104) a strong analysis while remaining aware of my own biases as a former NECMO teacher and principal around retaining teachers. As a principal I spent a large amount of time devising ways to retain the top teachers on our teaching team. I had to be self-aware of a tendency to revert to this mindset and worked to be careful not to “put on my principal hat” when interviewing participants. In order to counter this bias I believe I was successful in conducting long interviews using “rich data” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126), a tactic allowing me to see details in participants’ responses that pushed me to avoid large generalizations.

### **Generalizability**

This study focused on generalizability through the Lincoln and Guba framework of transferability (1985) that places an onus on those interested in utilizing the findings of the qualitative research in question to be the ones to push for such a transfer of knowledge

from the original research to new application. This transferring is often executed through the use of “thick description” or a “description of the setting and participants of the study as well as a detailed description of the findings with adequate evidence presented in the form of quotes from participant interviews, field notes, and documents” (Merriam, 2009, p.227). In this study I specifically incorporated the use of thick description when describing each of the participants backgrounds and interests including their prior teaching experiences and current reasons for teaching at their school.

### **Limitations**

The design of this study comes with limitations, particularly around the generalizability of the study given its size and design features. The most obvious limitation of the study is the size of the sample. There were fifteen individuals interviewed and even with nine of them being teachers the study is certainly not indicative of all teachers working at NECMOs. The study is also limited in that it was set in the state of Texas and in no other states. This is important to note as many of the nation’s NECMOs are located in urban areas on both coasts that may have different cultures than the city where the study took place in Texas, thus the geography should be noted. The study also only focused on teachers teaching middle school grades with two high school teachers also included. As noted previously there is prior research showing that teachers teaching these middle school can have greater attrition than other grade levels. However we cannot extrapolate from the study that responses from middle school teachers will be applicable in elementary or high school teaching environments.

An additional limitation of the study was the selection of the participants, which was influenced by principal preference and invitation. Due to the number of teachers who met the criteria for the study of having taught at least three years, and ideally being in a

middle school grade level and TEA tested subject area there were few participants to select, particularly given the standard attrition over time at NECMOs. That being said after applying the criteria for the study principals still were able to determine which teachers they thought would be interested and or appropriate for the study. This selection process may have held bias as principals could have selected teachers more prone to giving positive responses that would reflect well on their school, or potentially to select teachers with a track record of positivity with external visitors or researchers to the school. I did not find, nor feel that teachers were being overly positive or flattering of the school in their responses but it is possible that they were.

An additional limitation in the selection of the participants was the lack of heterogeneity among participants. Among the nine teachers interviewed there was only one male, and only two people of color, both female. Six of the nine teachers interviewed were white women. The study was not designed to focus on teachers with this background, but ended up with a lack of racial and gender diversity.

A core challenge of this study and an acute limitation was the absence of themes impacting teacher meaning making that were not discussed during the interviews. Teachers may have had strong factors that influenced their meaning making process, but if I did not ask about those specific factors they may not have surfaced. It is quite possible that teacher responses focused on certain parts of their meaning making that the interview questions elicited while other logic within their meaning making was not articulated during the interview. For example, I asked teachers about the top factors that influenced their meaning making process. This question may have brought out very specific responses from teachers around specific people or objects, such as their school principal, or their salary. If I had asked the question a different way, for example with a word other than factor such as “people in their lives,” responses may have included different rationale around how their

family or friends influence their decision to continue teaching. I did not ask teachers about social influences on their teaching decision such as their relationships outside of school, their familial background, nor their socio-economic background, or cultural norms from where they grew up. It is possible that each of these factors played a key role in their decision making.

On the other hand, it is possible that teachers may not have shared some of their meaning making insights because they themselves did not know their own meaning making processes, or at least not in a way that they were able to articulate at their interview. For instance, a teacher in the study could have explained that they made their decision to stay based predominantly on the relationships they had built with their peers on their grade level team. That may very well have been true or at least they believed that to be true. However, the reality for this teacher may have been that they were actually making their retention decision based upon how familiar the teaching environment in their current school compared to the school in which they themselves attended. The lens of the importance of the teachers on their team may have only been a portion of their focus on finding an environment similar to their past- but they themselves do not realize that an environment similar to their past is what they are seeking.

In this example the teacher may not actually know himself or herself that their core decision making tenant was a school environment consistent with their own personal education experience. This lack of clarity within the interview subjects' internal meaning within this study is quite possible and is a core limitation of this study.

Another limitation of the study is the normative culture of NECMO charter schools. These schools often have strong student and adult cultures that carry messages about the importance of key objects or beliefs within the school, such as the value of a college education, or the need to complete homework to do well in class. These values also often

have common phrases, terminology, or descriptions connected with them such as “check in document” or “data conversation” as well as cultural norms such as teachers first considering ways that they can improve their practice before looking towards student challenges that are used and understood by multiple staff members. This same premise of a common language and culture may have also been a limiting factor in the breadth of responses that teachers provided regarding their retention meaning making.

Finally, a key limitation a key limitation for this study was the standard for the interpretation of data. Each of the participants in this study, particularly the teachers were making their own meaning as they weighed various factors on whether to return to their school or not each year. In addition to this meaning making process they were also determining exactly how forthcoming wanted to be in explaining these factors to an outside interviewer. As noted previously I intentionally worked to create the conditions for trust between the participants and myself as an interviewer- meeting teachers in their classroom or a location that they proposed, acknowledging my own NECMO background and position, and describing the mechanisms to maintain their anonymity within the study. However despite these efforts it is possible that participants still utilized varying levels of candor when describing their meaning making process, this variance could in turn impact the results of the study given that the findings are based upon specific quotations and recurring themes that the participants described.

I attempted to guard against this limitation by being consistent in my questioning through an adherence to the interview questions, and by noting common phrases or descriptions that interviewees used to describe their working environment, for example, their colleagues, principal and students. I also noted in advance that I would only include an interviewee’s response as part of an emerging theme if I had explicit evidence via their statements as opposed to an allusion to a potential theme or a vague reference to a challenge

they were facing. When respondents were vague in describing their meaning making I did ask follow up questions, but if I was unable to obtain a clear description of a theme I did not include it in the findings. I feel that the themes presented in the following chapters do represent similarities in the responses of the participants as evidenced by the similar language- at times identical phrases- used by participants across each school site. That being said the level of relationship trust between interviewees and interviewer is also a limitation worth considering.

## **Chapter 4: Case Study #1; Eagle Public Schools, Angel College Preparatory**

### **NECMO DESCRIPTION**

The mission of the Eagle CMO network is to “prepare students from underserved communities for success in college and citizenship.” This focus on college for students from “underserved communities” aligns to missions of other NECMOs in the study and across the country. In addition to the mission statement the organization also features a vision statement on its website which reads, “To ensure students reach their potential, Eagle Public Schools will become the region’s largest creator of college graduates.” This ambition to grow in scale to achieve a larger impact is also aligned to the work of other NECMOs.

Like other NECMOs the Eagle network also has specific core values on its website and within its schools. These values align to language in the research literature used by other NECMOs, including the phrases “No Excuses,” and “Closing the Achievement Gap.” These core values are prominently displayed in the lobbies and hallways of the schools in the region along with collegiate banners and the ACT scores needed to attend prestigious universities around the country. College is the key focus in the school buildings even in the lower elementary grade levels, which feature signs stating the future college graduation date for the kindergarten and first grade classes.

The network was founded in Texas and currently serves 35,000 students in multiple cities and has won national recognition while also receiving public criticism for its expansion. There are currently more than 60 schools in the network, with plans publicly posted to triple the number of students served in future years. Like other schools in the study and NECMOs across the country, the student population at Eagle is predominantly low income with approximately 89% of students in the network receiving a free or reduced-

price lunch, and 49% of students deemed to be at risk per the state’s criteria. (See Table 6 for student demographic information for the state, district and school). 93.8% of the students in the network are Latino/ Hispanic, 2.6% are white, and 2.6% are African-American. Teachers in the network are generally quite young with only 1.6 years of experience working at Eagle. 38% of the teachers at the network statewide were new to teaching last year, 49% had been teaching for between one to five years. (See Table 6 for network and school teacher data).

Table 6: Eagle Network and Angel College Prep Teacher & Administrator Data

| <u>NECMO</u>                       | <u>Annual<br/>Teacher<br/>Turnover<br/>(%)</u> | <u>Avg.<br/>Years<br/>Teaching<br/>Exp w<br/>district.</u> | <u>Beginning<br/>teachers<br/>%</u> | <u>1-5 years<br/>teaching<br/>experience<br/>%</u> | <u>Exp of<br/>principal w<br/>district/</u> | <u>Exp of<br/>assistant<br/>principal w<br/>district/</u> |
|------------------------------------|--|--|-------------------------------------|--|---|---|
| State of Texas                     | 16.4%  | 7.3 years  | 8.1%                                | 27.3.0%  | 12.2 years                                  | 10.1 years  |
| Eagle Public Schools (All regions) | 23.4%  | 1.6 years  | 38.7%                               | 49.0%  | 4 years                                     | 3.4 years   |
| Angel College Prep                 | 11% (Principal reported)                       | 1.2 years  | 54.1%                               | 37.6%  | 3.0 years (self-reported)                   | N/A   |

Source: Texas Education Agency 2016-2017 TAPR Report

Teacher attrition across all schools in the network is 23.4% as measured by the 2016-2017 TAPR report from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), nine percentage points greater than the state average, but lower than the other two schools participating in the study. Because the network has one charter, the state teacher retention data is not broken



down by region making it challenging to isolate teacher retention data specifically for the local region. However, based on information provided from district leadership it appears that the local region generally has a teacher retention rate that lags behind the network's statewide average.

In order to address teacher retention, the network has created a teacher advancement team that focuses on the onboarding, training, coaching and retention of teachers across the network. Teacher retention is the top priority for the NECMO for the current academic year. District leadership have set an internal goal of 85% teacher retention for the 17-18 school year, a number that has been set in prior years but not achieved. In order to achieve this metric the organization has created multiple initiatives to proactively address teacher attrition in the 2017-2018 school year. These initiatives are noted in detail in a later section of this chapter.

## **SCHOOL DESCRIPTION**

Angel College Prep is located in a large urban city in Texas and is a member of the Eagle Public Schools network. Angel serves a student population of approximately 570 students in grades 6-11, with the school adding 12<sup>th</sup> grade next year. 96% of students receive a free or reduced-price lunch, and 71.5% of students are labeled at risk, both the highest rates among participating schools in the study. (See Table 7 for student demographic data). The student population demographics are similar to other NECMOs within this study; 93% Latino- Hispanic, 4% African American, and 3% white.

The school achieved a TEA rating of “Met Standard”, as well as six of the seven available distinctions for student performance. The average years of experience within the NECMO is 1.2 years, the lowest rate in the study. Angel College Preparatory does not have public teacher retention data available since only data at the state level is available for this

particular NECMO. However, Angel College Prep’s self-reported teacher retention was 89% for the 2016-2017 school year according to the school principal Cheslie. This is thirteen percentage points higher than the 76% retention rate for the network. According to the VP of teacher advancement, a central office administrator for the network, Angel’s teacher retention is an exemplar of teacher retention for the network. This accolade is particularly compelling considering that Angel has had four principals in the past five years. Cheslie is the only principal to have been at the school for two years in a row and is determined to remain a consistent figure on the campus for both the students and staff.

Table 7: 2016-2017 Eagle Public Schools & Angel College Prep Student Demographic Data

| <u>NECMO</u>                       | <u>% Students Latino/ Hispanic</u> | <u>% Students African American</u> | <u>% Students White</u> | <u>% Student s Asian</u> | <u>% Students At Risk</u> | <u>% Students Econ Dis</u> |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| State of Texas                     | 52.4%                              | 12.6%                              | 28.1%                   | 4.2%                     | 50.3%                     | 59.0%                      |
| Eagle Public Schools (All Regions) | 93.6%                              | 2.6%                               | 2.6%                    | .8%                      | 49.4%                     | 89.1%                      |
| Angel College Prep                 | 92.8%                              | 4.0%                               | 2.7%                    | .2%                      | 71.5%                     | 96.2%                      |

*Source: Texas Education Agency 2016-2017 TAPR Report*

## **INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS- DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR AND SCHOOL PRINCIPAL**

I interviewed two administrators with the Eagle Public Schools network, a central office administrator leading teacher retention efforts, and the principal of the case study school. The interview with the central office administrator took place in the regional office and the principal interview took place on campus.

### **VP Of Teacher Advancement—Eagle CMO**

Antonia is a white female in her early thirties who is a central office administrator at the Eagle charter management organization. She is originally from the west coast where she attended traditional public schools and moved to Texas to teach high school as a Teach For America corps member after attending college. After teaching high school world history for three years she moved to the local region where she was hired to teach high school in a different NECMO. She taught for five years and also held a number of leadership roles while teaching including grade level chair, academic chair (leading professional development), and instructional coach. She later decided to join the Eagle CMO network in order to better support teachers as the VP of teacher advancement a position where she was able to design and now manage the teacher career pathway at the network. She was hired with the “explicit purpose of building a program to retain teachers”, and create a pathway with rewards, recognition and professional growth opportunities for teachers who want to remain in the classroom. She has been in this role for the past four years and has overseen the implementation and ongoing execution of the network’s teacher career pathway during this time.

### **Cheslie, Principal, Angel College Prep—Eagle CMO**

Cheslie is a white male in his early thirties. After completing college, he began his teaching career with Teach for America, working as a middle school teacher in a traditional

public school district. He taught for three years and then became a teacher with the Eagle CMO where he taught math for a year before becoming an assistant principal. After one year as an assistant principal he became a principal at an Eagle College Prep middle school and then moved to the local region where he has been the principal at Angel College Preparatory for the past two years. During his interview Cheslie noted that, he went into school leadership at the Eagle Charter network “to create a school where every single teacher from top to bottom is really, really high-performing.” He seemed to deeply believe that the teacher in each of the classrooms at the school that he led was the key to academic success. He therefore expended considerable time and energy recruiting and interviewing prospective teachers while simultaneously spending time with existing teachers to ensure that they remained at the school. Cheslie is the fourth principal in five years at the school and is determined to remain in the role and provide stability.

#### **CMO DISTRICT LEVEL TEACHER RETENTION INITIATIVES**

Eagle District VP of teacher Advancement Antonia described three key teacher retention initiatives for the 2017-2018 school year; Teacher Career Pathway (TCP), salary and bonuses, and building manager capacity. Each of these initiatives built on work completed in prior years for each area. For example the TCP was introduced four years ago and continues to be adjusted each year.

#### **District retention initiative—Teacher Career Pathway (TCP)**

The Eagle School district is focused on teacher retention, in fact according to district administrator Antonia, the network has set an organization wide goal of retaining 85% of the teachers in the organization by the 2018-2019 school year. This shared sense of purpose and belief in the importance of teacher retention permeates the organization

including the Angel College Prep campus in a number of ways. The most specific examples of the CMO's focus on teacher retention are the teacher career pathway, a district wide system of teacher rewards and recognition and the organization's attention to regional teacher salary structure. Interestingly the teachers stayers were divided on the efficacy of both of these initiatives on their own decision making as well as that of other teachers they knew. The organization's website describes teacher career pathways as an investment in teachers where they receive, "professional development, influence, recognition, and compensation." The Teacher Career Pathway or TCP is a large part of Eagle's human capital strategy focused on retaining teachers. VP of Teacher Advancement Antonio explained the purpose of the TCP during her interview:

When I joined Eagle in 2013, our yearly teacher retention was 72%. I was hired with the explicit purpose of building a program to retain Eagle teachers. What we were hearing from our teachers was that being a teacher at Eagle is hard, being a teacher at Eagle is very rewarding, teachers come to Eagle because they want to grow and develop, and the only way to earn a promotion was to leave the classroom and move into administration. And a ton of teachers had no interest in administration, which left them in a bind. They could either leave Eagle, leave teaching entirely, move into administration, or just come to terms with the fact that they would never be promoted even though they were really extraordinary individuals. So, the Teacher Career Pathway sought to fill that gap.

Given the network's current 76.6% teacher retention per TEA, it is tempting to doubt the efficacy of the pathway on teacher's meaning making. However, Antonia points to the fact that since its inception teacher retention has risen to 84% (self-reported) and that 70% of first year teachers point to the pathway as a point of rationale for their joining the Eagle network. One reason for the discrepancy between the state data and Antonia's self reported data is that the network tracks retention based on teachers returning to work for

the organization in any role, e.g. administrator or counselor, while the state tracks teacher retention data based on teachers returning explicitly to the classroom.<sup>30</sup>

### **District retention initiative—salary and bonuses**

According to Antonia, the Eagle Network has been successful so far in updating its salary plan to support teachers in the past year. She says,

Human Resources did some really great work working with an external compensation consultant to identify what was the highest salary in each of the regions that we had schools. In some areas, we were already at the highest. In some areas, we were very close, but we didn't advertise it very well. And in some areas, we needed to increase our salaries to make sure we were externally competitive. And in one year, we solved the salary challenges.

For the upcoming year the Eagle network is planning on continuing to review its salary scales to maintain a ranking as the top paying or top three paying school districts in each region it serves.

### **District retention initiative—building manager capacity**

Much of the research literature on teacher retention links the capacity and effectiveness of teacher managers --whether principals or assistant principals-- to teacher retention. Antonia and her team at Eagle Public Schools believe in this research and have built trainings and tools for school administrative team members to utilize in their work of managing and retaining teachers. Antonia explained the need for these types of training for principals across the network saying,

The relationship with [their] manager is just a really big deal. I think this is not unique to teaching, but if people don't love their manager, or even on

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<sup>30</sup> TEA describes teacher retention with the following definition: "The percentage of teachers from the fall of 2015–16 who were not employed in the district in the fall of 2016–17. It is calculated as the total FTE count of teachers from the fall of 2015–16 who were not employed in the district in the fall of 2016–17, divided by the total teacher FTE count for the fall of 2015–16. Staff who remained employed in the district but not as teachers also count toward teacher turnover. (Source of data: PEIMS; Record 050, Staff – Employment – Payroll Summary, Record 090, Staff Data – Responsibilities, Submission 1)"

the other end of the spectrum, if people just don't have a positive relationship with their manager or an actively destructive relationship with their manager, there is no initiative or amount of money that is going to keep them in the job....

She also described how the trainings could be actually implemented in a school setting, saying,

...[We] crafted some trainings for leaders on how to have a retention conversation, how to talk to teachers to make them want to stay. When you bump into your teacher in the hallway and papers spill everywhere and you help them pick them up on the floor and you see an application to graduate school in the pile of papers, instead of deciding that that person wasn't very committed and now you hate this employee to acknowledge and say, "Oh, I'm having a retention conversation right now. I didn't expect this. I didn't mean to be having this conversation, but I have the skills and I can hold this conversation with this teacher right now so that they feel supported and know that I'm going to back them up. And also, I have a note to myself that I need to do some extra work to make teaching in my school as attractive to them as this graduate school is.

In interviewing Antonia, it was clear that manager training was a challenge given the size of the organization, the newness of the managers across the network, and that the number one reason why teachers left the district per exit interview information was their relationship with their manager. Cheslie, the school principal also recognized this challenge and noted that there needed to be greater skill building done to support district principals like himself on how to talk to teachers explicitly about retention and the ways in which to lead in order to retain teachers. He said,

We do a really good job of teaching principals and assistant principals how to be really great instructional coaches, but also there's just a lot of empathy that goes into this job like being a better manager for someone... it's about understanding where they're coming from, and I don't know that we train people as much in some of think ultimately do help with retention.

This challenge of training managers to improve their practice is critical, particularly in a network like Eagle with new schools opening each year per their expansion plan. One additional way that the network's leadership was working to support teachers' retention

meaning making in addition to manager training was through clear and consistent communication.

### **District retention initiative—ongoing communication with teacher leaders**

The Eagle network values communication with teachers, specifically gathering feedback from teachers on what initiatives are working well for teachers and what are not. The network does this through different means of communication. Twice a year all teachers (as well as all other staff members) receive a survey requesting information on teachers' satisfaction and requesting feedback. Another form of communication between district leaders and teachers is executed through the teacher advisory council for each Eagle region. This group meets three times a year to provide feedback to the regional office leadership team on initiatives ranging from adjustments to the Teacher Career Pathway ranking system to the amount of time for student lunch. Teacher feedback is taken into consideration before final district wide decisions are made.

One other recurring event that supports teacher feedback and communication is the annual teacher retreat. Teachers with a level four or five designation (with five being the highest possible designation), on the teacher career pathway are invited to a weekend retreat with their families to provide district leaders with feedback on items ranging from salary structure to curriculum. All of these initiatives have been recurring for at least two years and will continue at least through the 2017-2018 school year if not farther per district VP of Teacher Advancement Antonia.

### **INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS—TEACHERS**

I interviewed three teachers at Angel College Prep. The team members had attended college both inside and outside of Texas. (See Appendix C for Colleges from all attendees).



One teacher interviewed attended a non-traditional certification program; the other two teachers were certified through traditional programs. One of the teachers was a former Teach For America corps member, the other two were not. All interview participants had taught at the school for at least three years and were planning on returning to teach at the school in the upcoming year.

**Steve, teacher, special education, Angel College Prep—Eagle CMO**

Steve is a white male in his mid-thirties who currently teaches 10th and 11th grade special education. He attended college and was alternatively certified through the Texas Teachers program. He became interested in teaching after substitute teaching in Alaska where he taught a variety of grade levels and content areas. Prior to working for the Eagle school network he worked for the traditional school district in the area for two years where he was involved with the teachers' union. The 2017-2018 school year marks his fifth year working as a special education teacher for the Eagle network; all five years have been at Angel College Preparatory. Steve believes deeply in the importance of serving students with disabilities and that those students "who are the most vulnerable, receive the best services". He has previously worked in ninth grade and middle school special education.

**Mary, teacher, 8<sup>th</sup> grade English, Angel College Prep—Eagle CMO**

Mary is a white female in her thirties who teaches 8<sup>th</sup> grade English at the Angel College Preparatory network within the Eagle network. She began teaching as a Teach For America corps member as a means of giving back to the community while completing an alternative certification program. The 2017-2018 school year will be her fourth year at Angel College Prep and her sixth year of teaching over all. As a more veteran teacher on the campus she values the autonomy within the curriculum provided by administrators and

her relationships with other teachers who believe deeply in the mission of the school. She also believes in the importance of student achievement results even if measured by “not the best indicators” like state testing, as well as building a strong love of literacy and reading in her middle school students. Over her five years of teaching she has never worked on a grade level team that has not lost at least one teacher to attrition. Despite having returned for four years in a row, this teacher stayer was unclear on whether she will return to the campus for the following school year. At the time of her interview she believed she would return but wanted to see how her year progressed.

**Gabrielle, teacher, ninth grade Spanish, Angel College Prep—Eagle CMO**

Gabrielle is a Latina in her early thirties who teaches 9th grade Spanish. She is single and does not have children. She was hired by the Eagle network to teach at a middle school in a separate region after receiving her bachelor’s degree. She is now the grade team leader for the ninth grade at Angel College Prep where she is in her third year of teaching at the school. She has previously sixth and eighth grade English at another Eagle campus for four years and moved to the local region after having met the school’s previous principal at a teacher training. Gabrielle is bilingual and is a firm believer in the importance of communicating with her students and their families in Spanish and the message of respect that this sends. She has worked for three different principals in her three years at Angel College Prep. Growing up she attended private schools and recognized the influence of her early education on her academic success.

## **FINDINGS ALIGNED ACROSS ALL TEACHERS**

### **Teacher Stayers value their manager**

A strong and dependable manager matters to teacher stayers. The strength of the principal and/ or the teacher's direct manager (e.g. other school leader, assistant principal) was critically important for teacher stayers. When a teacher's manager is consistently shifting year to year whether that person is a principal or an assistant principal it puts strain on a school's longer tenured teachers. This was evident in the comments from each teacher on the importance of the relationship they had with their manager. These responses also echo the research on the importance of how a consistent leadership team and teaching force lead to a consistent culture within a school and how the lack thereof can contribute to some teachers choosing to leave a school. For those teachers who choose to stay, the quality of their manager seems to have been an important constant to them year after year.

Gabrielle, a ninth grade Spanish teacher, said, "Leadership is so important, if you feel like your leader cares about you and wants you to grow and is there for you, it's just [good and leads to]...feeling valued in the organization. If not [work] will suck."

Gabrielle added that for her a manager's role was to pay attention to her (and other teacher's) personal needs but also to push her and other teachers to improve their practice. Too much of one but not the other was not helpful. She expected her principal to "do what they are supposed to [do]" as an instructional leader which she defined as "being consistent in observations, going to check ins, praising the good, working on trying to fix deltas, and the changes that need to happen for growth."

Gabrielle also acknowledged how important her manager's work was in her decision to return to the staff. She said,

[My manager] convinced me, he just cares about people, which was very important for [me], It was instrumental, like I gave him what I wanted in

order for me to stay, and that one of my biggest things was like, “You’re going to be my manager, if I stay you have to be my manager.”

Mary, an eighth grade English teacher added that how important it has been for her to have respect for her manager and how that person was key in her decision to stay on at the school saying,

He’s been a phenomenal manager no matter what position he’s put in, I have a lot of respect for him as a person...he’s one of those people that reminds you why you’re doing it I guess, we’re on the same page...The reason I stayed was my [manager] convinced me not to [leave].

Another teacher, Steve, a special education teacher, echoed this sentiment on the importance of his manager in his retention decision stating,

I started realizing it’s more important ... who my manager is, someone I can get along with really well...It was more about the administrator’s personality...if I were to seek another position, I would require to meet with my manager or my administrator at least before I accepted the position.

### **Teacher stayers believe deeply in their school’s mission and are united in its importance**

The mission of the Eagle School district is to “prepare students from underserved communities for success in college and citizenship” with an organizational vision to “become the region’s largest creator of college graduates.” Teacher stayers at Angel College Prep came to the school and have remained there because of their belief in the importance of the mission and vision as well as their belief that their fellow colleagues are as bought into the mission as they are. Mary described the importance of having colleagues who were aligned in their support of the mission saying,

I feel like when I go to work every day I know that my beliefs and my expectations of kids are on level with the people I work with...like the vision and the mission is there and alive, and it does make it easier to get there at the time that I do, and stay until I do, like if everybody is working on it together, and it’s more attainable.

Gabrielle passionately described why the mission is so personally important to her, noting that as one of the only Latinas on her grade level team she felt a deep responsibility to the students who looked like her in her classroom and grade level:

I really believe in to and through [college], definitely the through piece, you don't see that at other charter schools and that is a piece I really believe in. It has been seven years of my life that I've dedicated to this mission, and one trying year is not going to stop me from seeing this mission come to fruition...I have learned a lot about the injustices in the education world for persons of color, closing that gap for students of color is my biggest mission and I can do that best here at Eagle in [the city].

Steve, a special education teacher described how important the community of predominantly low-income students working at Angle College Prep was to him. For him being a part of the school mission meant being involved in the community. He said,

I was definitely drawn to working with low SES populations, ...in living and working in my community. So right now I live close to school, and I see a lot of my students at the grocery store. And I will bump into parents at Subway, or I will bump into parents at Goodwill. That's important for me, too. It's important that I see my students outside of campus and that they see me, and that we can kind of put all the pieces together. 'Hey, we're part of the neighborhood feel, we're part of the community here.'

It is clear in interviewing the teacher stayers at Angel that the school mission and the number of staff united around the mission are both a key part of teachers' meaning making when constructing their decision to stay or leave each year. Mary stated these two beliefs saying,

Like you know if you work at Eagle you're at least surrounded by people who also believe in the idea that all kids could and can go to college, which is important I feel like. ...You're not on an island, whereas opposed to, I feel like if I went to work at a public school, I couldn't be upset if... the understanding or like my view of education was completely different than everyone else.

Gabrielle explained the importance of the school's college for all mission mentality in stark terms noting that it was rare to find the type of focus on college graduation that she

believed in. She said, “Once a child leaves Eagle they are losing their guarantee for a college education. Once they leave we don’t know...”

This type of deep belief in the importance of the school’s education led to strong relationships between teacher stayers at the Angel campus and their students, a factor that was also important to the teacher stayer’s meaning making process around returning to teach each year.

### **Strong student relationships matter to teacher stayers**

Three themes emerged in the commentary from teachers at Angel College Prep regarding their relationship with their students how these relationships influenced their meaning making about the school environment. 1.) The students were the most important variable in the teachers’ decision making, this was true for all three teachers interviewed. 2.) The keeping of one’s word to students was very important to teachers particularly around remaining with certain cohorts of students through graduation a theme that also emerged with all three teachers. 3.) The longer the teachers had stayed at the school the deeper their relationship with certain cohorts or grade levels grew which pushed the teachers to want to stay longer. In addition to these three themes, Gabrielle, a Latina teacher also felt compelled to stay in order to advocate for the students as a fellow Latina in a world of leaders that seemed very white to the students- a powerful incentive to stay on the school team.

Based on the interviews it appears that once an Angel College Prep teacher remained at the school a certain number of years that the increasing depth of the student relationships they carried would pull them to remain at the school. This occurred despite some of the challenges of teaching there. This was made clear in the teachers’ comments on which factors were most important to them and in the vivid language they used to

describe their meaning making when thinking about staying at the school through the lens of their student relationships. Here are some of their comments:

The primary [reason I stay teaching here] is like my personal relationship with students. I've just ... As you stick around more and more, you have a deeper and deeper connection with students. They become part of your family and part of your friends, and you look forward to seeing them every day. And I don't think you get that if you just know someone for a year or a semester. Over time, seeing someone grow — the same way I would have a personal friendship — I just have a vested interest now in seeing where their growth is going. (Steve, special education)

I just feel like you have to care about kids, like you have to want to get better, and I know kids do better when they have the same teacher from start to finish, like our school does best when we can keep someone there, you know...Like at the end of the day, I will be here at least until the upcoming 11th graders graduate, the ones that I taught in eighth grade, and I thought about (student name), as long as he's at Angel, like if he left I would leave...(Mary, 8<sup>th</sup> grade English)

So definitely the number one thing [to stay for] were the kids, I mean, those kids...knowing that they had just gone through losing two principals they were very close to...I couldn't do that to them. I had one junior, one young woman, come up to me and is like, 'You can't leave, I will literally have no one.' To having some of the kids be like, 'You're the only who looks and sounds like us. Like, you can't leave. You're the only voice that we have.' (Gabrielle, 9<sup>th</sup> grade Spanish)

These comments provide a powerful moral rationale for the teachers to remain at Angel College Preparatory. In their comments it is clear that they equate a decision to leave the school with a decision to leave the relationship that they have built with their students and to do so would be an act of betrayal. Mary articulates this saying, "It is kind of scary to think you know, like if I did go to another school, I would have to build that up all over again...it's almost like a relationship, like that would be like cheating on Eagle."

Perhaps no teacher interviewed carried this moral load with more conviction and fortitude than Gabrielle, who felt pushed to be the literal and cultural translator for her

students and families with the administration. She said that recent changes in the school's leadership personnel compelled her to remain with her students stating,

The kids watched a very diverse lead team go to a very white lead team. So the whole lead team, which consists of the principal, two principals in training, two assistant principals, two college counselors and an academic counselor, we have two Latino's and only one of them is fluent. So the kids would come up like, 'There's a lot of white people. They don't understand us, like how are we supposed to trust them if they don't know what we live through?'

This student sentiment is important to note and shows the strength of the bond that Gabrielle has built with her students. Although the other two interviewed teacher stayers did not speak of their work as explicitly along racial lines, they both noted that the community- which is predominantly Latino/ Hispanic, and the socioeconomic status of the students- which is nearly 90% low income were important to them and their decision to continue to teach at the school. Steve and Mary are both white and they both noted that it was important to them to work in a school that served predominantly students from low-income backgrounds and that the work with these students and their families was important to them. Special education teacher Steve explained this rationale as being part of his retention decision making process as he wrestled with increasing gentrification in the neighborhood around the school. He said, "We're serving less of our low-income students, and more gentrified students are coming in. So that plays an important part of my decision too. I want to make sure I'm servicing those students, low SES students. So that impacts [my retention decision]."

Mary, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher, also expressed a similar sentiment saying that she saw teaching in the neighborhood where Angel College Prep was located as a way to support the community stating that teaching at Eagle was, "a way to give back, a way to kind of work with communities as well as kids..." Connections to the community were not



limited to students but included parents as well. Gabrielle explained that it was important for her to communicate with the parents of students who were in her class and that it was important for teacher stayers to be able to have these conversations. She said,

I pride myself on connections I make with parents, I will go full Valley and speak Raza with them and give them an earful and get mad about how I parent their kid but they will be laughing by the end. If we remove those people who can have those conversations we are going to lose a lot of kids...

In interviewing each teacher stayer at Angel College Prep it was clear that the student relationships they had built and in turn their relationship with the community they served was a key, if not the key component of their decision to remain teaching at the school.

### **Teacher stayers are motivated to stay by student academic performance in pursuit of college**

All three teachers interviewed at Angel College Preparatory explained the importance of student achievement results on why they choose to continue to teach at the school and have made that decision each year since they arrived. Put another way, these teachers wanted to be sure that they were doing a good job at teaching and they measured their performance as teachers in quantitative ways that aligned to measuring sticks devised by the state and the school. This was evident in comments like this one from Mary 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher who explained that the Texas state exam helped her to know how well she was doing as a teacher which was important to her own efficacy as a professional. She said,

I do care a lot about results, because that's how my kids are measured within the system, I don't think that the STAAR test ...is necessarily the best indicator of whether or not my kids can read, [but] I do feel effective when I can successfully help students pass these tests...which makes me feel effective not just as a reading teacher but as someone

who works in education...and feeling effective, or feeling like I at least have the freedom to be effective as a teacher is one of the most important things for me.

Her colleague Gabrielle was in agreement with this line of thought. She stated, “It is worth the time and everything you sacrifice.... I have committed 7 years of my life to Eagle, the [student achievement] data supports that we are doing something right at Eagle.”

Special education teacher Steve also measured his efficacy similarly stating, “I typically measure my effectiveness around quantitative data with my students, especially the longitudinal [data].” All of these educators knew that measuring their student’s performance was important to their ability to know if they were doing a good job as teachers, and doing a good job was very important to them because they equated an ascension in their students’ academic data as a likely ascension in their students’ probability of graduating from college.

Teachers also believed that they were doing a good job as teachers due to the fact that they worked at Eagle and had worked there longer than many of their teaching peers. It became clear during the teacher interviews that there was a sentiment among the interviewees that it was not easy to work at the Eagle network, and that those who did teach and stay teaching there had to be pretty good at the work of teaching. This belief or “teaching swagger” was evident in teachers’ comments about their own achievement in teaching students and also in the ways that they perceived newcomers to the teaching team. Gabrielle’s comment on a child leaving Eagle and, “losing their guarantee for a college education” shows this mindset. Both Steve and Mary talked about the importance of all of the members of their grade teams “keeping up” or “pulling their weight.” Mary was very blunt when asked about ways that the administration might contribute to improved teacher retention stating, “Stop hiring first year teachers!” She believed that those teachers should not work at Angel, because the expectations are too high coming from the administrators

and from the students themselves and that most teachers in their first year cannot meet them.

Perhaps the reason Mary was so attuned to minding the teachers who joined her team was because like her principal she believed that what the school was seeking to achieve in sending all of its (predominately low income) students to and through college was a massive challenge and not all teachers were cut out for it- at least not cut out to stick with it. What this belief meant in practice was that teachers grew very close knit with their peers. For the teacher stayers it meant a level of respect and even friendship with other teachers who were working with them at the school and were proving themselves, both in their ability to lead students towards achievement, their ability to build relationships with students, and the flat out fact that they were sticking around.

### **Teacher stayers value their personal relationships with members of their teams**

Ninth-grade Spanish teacher Gabrielle stated unequivocally that that she stayed because, “a lot of the teachers are my best friends and I didn’t want to lose that.” 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher Mary had the same feeling saying, “like the interaction you have with colleagues is very important, like I would say my core group of friends are all teachers at Allan, and I see them even in the summer regularly.”

The school principal also recognized the role that the social networks within the school played as teachers made retention decisions. Although he was not a part of many of these gatherings he believed in their importance saying,

...A lot of the people who have been here get along really well. They go to socials together, happy hours, they play golf, they just do things together. And so I think that if you have a network of people that support you, that know you, that care about you, I think that that makes a big impact on their decision [to stay or not to stay]...

Although special education teacher Steve was not a regular at happy hours he made it clear that he “wanted to have a productive platonic relationship” with his teacher peers and that if that were not the case it would be a strong factor pushing him from the school. 9<sup>th</sup> grade Spanish teacher Gabrielle added,

I think out of, yeah at Angel, we’re just close that everybody’s like always talking to everybody. Which I think is really important. We hang out after school anyway, like you would think we, we see each other every day, why would we want to see each other for more time than we have to, but we’re literally like best friends.

For the stayer teachers, the focus on time with colleagues was not limited to only those who were in a circle of friends but also included those who were in need of help and wanted advice and teaching insight from teacher stayers. The chance to engage colleagues and help them to improve their practice was also a factor that teachers considered when making meaning of their decision to stay at the school year over year.

**The opportunity to lead and have a positive impact on colleagues is important to teacher stayers**

One of the key new findings that emerged from the interviews with the teachers at Angel was their intense interest in supporting the other teachers on the school team. This sentiment ran counter to what Antonia the district administrator anticipated. Her assumption was that teachers, particularly those with more longevity wanted to focus on the work of their classrooms and not be bothered to lead grade teams or curriculum planning groups. In fact each of the teachers made it clear that helping other teachers at the school was not only important to them but it was important for the school itself because it ultimately led to increased teacher retention.

Although none of the teachers had read recent research on the importance of teacher longevity in shaping a consistent school culture and ultimately student achievement they

did seem to believe in the importance of teacher retention in their school. They did this in a number of ways. Steve coached all of the new special education teachers and teacher assistants in the building, asking them what they needed and encouraging them when they had tough days. Gabrielle has been and continues to be a grade team leader setting the tone for culture for the freshman class and the other 9<sup>th</sup> grade teachers through team dinners at her home among other familial events. Mary is the 8<sup>th</sup> grade course leader for all 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teachers in the district. She leads a weekly webinar on how to best use that week's curriculum resources. And in perhaps the most explicit leadership role Steve sits on the school's teacher advisory council, a group that gave him a common language and platform to address his colleagues on school issues. Here are Mary, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher and 8<sup>th</sup> grade English course leader for the network's thoughts on the importance of taking a leadership role with her often newer colleagues and how that may impact teacher retention and thus school culture;

When someone is so miserable that they would rather quit in the middle of the year than finish, you know, you want to help them. I don't want people to be miserable, I don't want someone to go home crying every day, it doesn't feel good to suck at your job so I know that, and that's like a human thing, you don't want people to be upset... having an opportunity to work to impact teachers, English teachers, eighth grade English teachers in other classrooms is important... I believe in the... kind of the responsibility a teacher has in a classroom, like this is the only year students will ever have eighth grade English, period. ...if I'm not doing everything I can to help [other teachers] either have a successful year or at least feel like they have the resources to be more successful later, then I'm not doing my job, you know, like if you believe in what you're doing, then why wouldn't you want to give everyone else who's doing what you're doing the same sort of sense of responsibility, but also the ability to be successful at it. Like if you're gonna do it, do it all the way.

Gabrielle also explained her belief in helping other teachers and why this was important to her and hopefully for them. She said,

With my off period I was able to go observe more teachers. So that's when I would do my coaching.... I think for me to be a good leader, I want to model [good teaching and coaching] for [new teachers] I guess. So I was in there, and more than anything it was them knowing that I was there for them, and to try and make their lives easier and their craft better.

Gabrielle went a step further than observing her colleagues in action in their classrooms she also invited the teachers on her 9<sup>th</sup> grade team into her home in order to build rapport and trust at the beginning of the school year. She described the importance of how this meal led to a strong year for the team thus far stating,

...So I had them over at my house, I cooked them dinner, we had a little painting party and then I went through a bunch of like questions of how they like to receive feedback, like what is a misconception about them and their teaching style. We went through like procedural things, and I think that's why we worked really, really well together.

Steve deeply believes in the importance of supporting first year teachers or in his case para-professionals and in encouraging them to continue in their work with the school district. Given the influx of special education students year after year and thus the hiring of additional special education teachers each year he presented new teachers to Angel with a unique proposition. He has consistently told them, "If you stick around, if you'd like a teaching position next year, you have the opportunity to get one," and has worked to help para-professionals achieve that goal.

### **Long hours are a negative factor in weighing decision to stay on**

In addition to the prior themes that generally led teachers towards remaining with Angel College Prep in the annual process of determining whether to stay or leave the school district, there was one consistent theme that pushed teachers to leave; the hours required to do the job well. All three of the teachers interviewed described the workload as a negative piece of their decision-making process. When things were going well, they took this factor in stride as a part of the work that they dealt with; when challenges were plentiful the

amount of time spent at work both in school and out of school seemed interminable. But regardless of how things were going the sheer amount of time it took to be a teacher at Angel College Prep was constant and was a tension point for other priorities outside of school for the teachers interviewed. This tension was described by Mary the eighth grade English teacher and eighth grade English course leader for the network, who stated,

...The hours [lead to teachers leaving], there's obviously the hours, I feel like people spend way too much time at work, like managers were requesting to meet with teachers on Sunday mornings, if you couldn't make a meeting it was like, "okay, well you don't care about your job," like if you couldn't do Saturday school, you weren't having tutoring at least two days a week, it was like an all-or-nothing, so I don't know how anyone with kids can be a teacher at Eagle...There are not enough hours in the day, like mathematically speaking, to be the kind of sister or daughter or friend that I would like to be, if I'm being the kind of teacher I know I need to be and in more than that, I don't have the emotional capital to give.... I know if I were to become a mom there is no way in hell that I would let the hopes and dreams I have for other peoples' kids come before my own, and I've seen teachers do that.... But I do believe that kids deserve a teacher who is going to do that, you know, like the best teachers are the ones that give everything, and I don't know how to [do] both...

Steve, a leader among the special education teachers known for his poise said,

So I think a big [influence on teacher retention decisions], and this was difficult, was work time. It's a lot. I think I've done, regularly, 60 hours for the last four years. So every week is 60 hours. I think sometimes a lot of new teachers are not prepared for that. Our campus specifically, I can't speak to other campuses too, does a lot of Saturday school. So it's a lot of Saturdays also...

Gabrielle, the ninth-grade team leader and ninth-grade Spanish teacher put it simply when asked about her decision-making process in returning to the school to teach each year. She explained that she considered the timing of her day, but that it had now become normal to her, noting that she was at school from 7:25 a.m. to 6:35 a.m. and that she had, "gone through this since 2011 with so many hours of my life..." The challenge of finding a balance between their working hours and their time outside of work was very real to these

teachers and from what I was able to discern they were failing at it. Despite their beliefs that they would be able to return to the school to teach the next year, they did not seem to see a way to avoid the negative impact of so many working hours on their long term morale and satisfaction. It seemed that they were in it for the sprint, and were determined to keep sprinting but somehow knew that they were not equipped for a true marathon.

This type of thinking was evident in the teachers' comments describing their desire to remain with students that they had started their teaching careers with and their own personal needs. This was evident in Steve's comments about his students and his timeline when he said,

What I really found with this year is I had a couple students in 9th grade who I got really interested in seeing -- and I just got invested in students and seeing what their future is going to be like, and I wanted to see what they would be like when they graduate. So they'll be 10th graders this year, so I definitely want to stick around at least for another year to see this student, X, matriculate another year.... I was close enough with them that I just ... I couldn't leave at the time.

Mary put the same sentiment around the tension between her belief in her students and the relationships she built with them and in her own longevity in starker and more explicit terms stating, "...I can't continue teaching with Eagle, but I'm not gonna leave the kids..."

## **FINDINGS ALIGNED ACROSS SOME TEACHERS**

The following findings were consistent across some, but not all of the teachers in the study as influential in their decision-making process on returning to teach at the school. Interestingly some of these findings such as influence of the Teacher Career Pathway, salary, professional development from manager feedback, and explicit acknowledgement from district leaders were clustered around district lead teacher retention initiatives, perhaps evidence that district level communication was either not being received in the



same way or perhaps not being received by some teachers at all. Other findings such as fear of leaving the school in general, and the length of commute were not aligned to the district's explicit teacher retention initiatives, but were mentioned by some teachers in the study.

### **Stayer teachers are divided on the importance of the teacher career pathway**

The TCP was not prevalent among the interviewees at Angel except for Gabrielle who explicitly stated that she loved the TCP and that, "it kept me more on board [more so] than if it wasn't there." For her the ability to be placed at level 4- a position of distinction among her peers- and the vision of moving to level 5<sup>31</sup>, the top level, were very motivating. For her peers the pathway did not have much resonance and was not part of the schema for those teachers' meaning making. Steve was blunt noting that the TCP, "wasn't in even the top six or top eight of my decision [points]. Mary also did not see the TCP as important to her but did think it was a good thing for the organization saying with a hint of ambiguity,

I think I'm like a four right now, I'm not even sure what all that gets me... I do like [the TCP]...it's good for the profession of teaching, and I hope that more schools and districts do things like that, I just don't, I don't see how it directly impacts my own career.... but if I'm being completely honest, it does not factor into [retention decision making].

### **Some stayer teachers value salary more than others in their decision making**

Teachers did not feel that their salary challenges were met, particularly in their city. Like the TCP, salaries proved to be important to Gabrielle but were not a core part of Steve or Mary's meaning making process on whether to stay with the school. Gabrielle made it clear that the salary in her current city was lower than what Eagle paid elsewhere in the

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<sup>31</sup> Within the Eagle network teachers are placed on a scale of 1-5 on the TCP, 1 being reserved for teachers that are new to teaching and 5 being reserved for teachers meeting the highest criteria derived from a mix of student achievement results, principal evaluation, parent survey, and student survey results.

state because salary at Eagle was based on “cost of labor, not cost of living,” she would have liked to see her region’s teacher salary change to match other regions, but the lower pay in her region was not enough to push her out from the organization. She understood and clearly had heard district teacher advancement leader Antonia’s message that Eagle salaries were among the highest in each region where the CMO has schools, but was frustrated her region did not match others. Gabrielle noted that if Eagle was not pushing to be the highest paying network in each region that she would consider leaving.

Steve and Mary on the other hand were not as focused on salary in their meaning making. Steve noted that money was “not necessarily influencing my decision [to stay]”, a sentiment that Mary agreed with saying, “money is important, however I don’t look at that stuff when I’m thinking about my future at Eagle, and I feel like I should, but I just don’t...”

### **Professional growth through consistent feedback and training matters to teacher stayers**

Not only did the stayer teachers work to help others they also valued the professional growth that they experienced working at the Eagle network. Many compared the environment at Angel College Prep to other school districts where they had worked noting the differences. Mary stated,

I do think working for Eagle gives teachers the chance to be successful in a way that we don’t have at another campus...you have so much opportunity for growth and development, and advancement. Our teachers want to improve, our teachers are like really passionate about education and teaching, it’s the place to be.

Gabrielle agreed with this thought noting that “my school’s willingness to help me get something to be better in the classroom” was important to her thinking on staying. Steve did not comment explicitly on the importance of professional development in his decision-making process, but was a believer in the importance of classroom observation.

### **Teacher stayers value being acknowledged and recognized for their work from district leaders**

Two of the three teachers interviewed noted that they appreciated being valued for their work by some of the top leaders in the Eagle CMO network. They recognized the importance of the leadership team doing this and explained that when top leaders focused on teachers that it helped teachers want to remain with the organization. Although neither teacher explicitly stated that the public acknowledgement from district leadership was a leading factor for their decisions, they did feel it was important to them and to other teachers to hear from these leaders. Mary appreciated the focus of the CMO on teachers stating,

I do think something that Eagle as a district is really good at doing is appreciating teachers. I can't think specifically, like the advanced teacher retreat...every single person who works for Eagle believes in how important teachers are, and I know that that's probably not true at other [districts]...The most important work that's done at Eagle is done in the classroom, 'like I know even all the way up from [the CEO], down to like... I don't know, instructional coaches, everyone always says that like while everyone's work is important, the work of a teacher in a classroom is the most important, so that... and that's important, and it's nice that that's said, and that definitely factors into me staying, and I'm sure other people too, staying specifically at Eagle.

Gabrielle did not think that the CMO was doing as good a job of appreciating and recognizing teachers as Mary did, but she did note that recognition and praise from district and regional leaders was important to teachers. She said, "Feeling valued is so important we need to do a better job of that, many leaders I have worked with are good at that, I hope new [regional leader] is as well."

### **Stayers stay because they are afraid to go somewhere else**

Two of the three teachers noted that an additional factor that was part of their calculus to stay at the school was the fact that they are not sure that they could actually

start over at another school. Although Mary had taught at a different school before teaching at the Eagle network, the concept of starting anew was daunting to her. She said, “It is kind of scary to think you know, like if I did go to another school, I would have to build that up all over again, and it’s like what if you can’t do it, what if you know, I don’t know if that makes sense, starting over?”

For Gabrielle the idea of moving schools also seemed too far-fetched for her to fathom at this point in her career given how much she had invested in the campus already. She said, “...Why am I going to stop now? Like I feel like I’ve come so far with Eagle, like why would I stop now?”

The act of changing schools does take work, verifying that certifications are in order, updating resumes and online profiles, applying for positions, going to interviews and eventually new trainings, all of this certainly takes work. However, this was not what was holding back these two teachers, for them the challenge was one of having to say goodbye and having to build up relationships with students and teacher peers all over again. That seemed to be just too much for some of them.

### **Commute matters in part to some teacher stayers**

The final factor that one of the two teachers identified was the length of the commute that they had to take to get to school each day. Since most of the teachers were working days that were twelve hours or longer the ability to not spend as much of the remaining hours of the day in the car could be expected, but only one teacher mentioned it. Steve explicitly noted that he did consider the length of their commute in their decision to return to the school and that he felt it was an important factor in his calculus. He said,

...Proximity to the school is a huge one. Like how close I am to the school is a major decision factor. Like if I don’t have to be in traffic to get to school, that will [Laughs] coerce me to stick around a little bit longer too. I live two

stoplights away. So I walk to campus now, I take the bus. So that's really great for me...the neighborhood feel, I want to live and work in my community so I can see them, but also not spending a lot of time getting home or getting to school, and that my time when the school day ends or when I clock out at 5:30, as much time of that is mine. I don't have to worry about sitting in traffic or commuting. I want as much of it back as possible.

Although other teachers at the Eagle network did not corroborate this point, it was clearly important to Steve. Although time of commute was not mentioned by other teachers at the Eagle Network, it was mentioned by teachers at other schools in this study as a key indicator of their decision making.

### **Findings on Alignment Between Teacher and Administrator perceptions on teacher retention decisions**

The teachers were aligned on the broad factors that mattered to them, with all three teachers noting the same seven criteria for their decision as being important, although the teachers placed these criteria in different orders of importance. These factors were, strength of manager, belief and unity of staff behind school mission, student relationships, staff relationships, student academic achievement, opportunities to lead, and the negative impact of long hours. There were also three factors that two of the three teachers noted as being important to their decision making, the importance of professional development and the fear of having to start somewhere new, and top district leadership providing praise and a focus towards teachers. The district teacher advancement leader's and school principal's combined responses mentioned six of these ten specific common factors when asked to consider how teachers made their decision to remain teaching with the Eagle network. So 60% of the most important factors that teachers consider when deciding to remain teaching at Angel College Preparatory were anticipated by the district administrator and the school principal's combined thinking. Cheslie noted clearly his belief in the power of the school's mission saying,

We are a district that people are proud to work for, I think we're doing a lot of the things that people say are impossible. I think there's something... attractive about that, you know. People say all the time, it's not possible, it's not possible, it's like no, we're proving that it is possible and I think that if you continue to motivate people that way, I think that that helps them feel the sense of pride.

He added that he intentionally looked for people that believed in the school's mission when he interviewed new teachers saying, "You ask people like, 'Hey, do you believe that all kids should go to college?' And no one's going to say no to that. But it's really making sure that people love the work that goes into that because it's not an easy mission at all."

He also was self-aware of the gap in his knowledge of the importance of a consistent direct manager for teachers, a factor that was critically important to all three teachers in the study as they made their decision to return. He described his growth in understanding the importance of a consistent manager for teachers by saying how he had spoken with a teacher who told him the following, "You know I've stayed here, now this is my fourth year here. I really like it here, and I understand this growth [of the network], but I've had a different manager every single year."

Cheslie then reflected on this statement saying,

And so that was something that we had never really considered it from that perspective, whereas like because you have an assistant principal of instruction who then becomes a Principal in Residence, that does make it hard on people. You have someone who's been there four years, that's a valued staff member and we're not even considering from his perspective, like this guy wants to have continuity in who's managing him. And so I think it can happen in a way that if we're not aware of it, it can be negative.

This is important and powerful learning on the part of the school leader, hopefully more opportunities for learning like this will take place.

An additional gap between the administrator's knowledge and teacher knowledge was the difference in perspective on the factors that appeared to be the most important to

the district teacher advancement leader; TCP and salary. These were each mentioned by the same teacher as being important, but not by the other two teachers. This teacher, Gabrielle noted that both district initiatives were a top part of her decision making, but for the two other teachers in the study both initiatives were negligible factors.

### **A gap in perception of praise and acknowledgement from leadership.**

There were different perspectives among the interviewees on how well the CMO's leadership was executing on praising and acknowledging teacher's work. All of the teachers and administrators noted how important praise and recognition from district level (in addition to school level) leaders was for teachers as they considered their decision to stay or leave the network.

Principal Cheslie and district administrator Antonia both felt like organization was doing a good job of engaging with teachers citing town hall meetings, all staff calls, the Teacher Advisory council and weekly video updates where the senior leadership team engaged with teachers. Cheslie noted that he thought leadership was approachable and that these actions helped teachers saying,

[Senior leadership] take questions and they take feedback and I think that that is a really positive thing for folks. And they have also done these things, these all staff conference calls; I think they do them like twice a year. I just think those things have a really positive impact [on teacher retention] for a couple reasons. I think one, [it] really puts a face to the organization and I think two, I think both of our most senior leaders are very down to earth people, I think people pick up on that really easily. So I think people being able to engage with them even in that one limited sort of area does have a really big impact [on retention].

Antonia explained how important it was to her to work for a school district that valued teacher retention as a top priority. She said,

I think it is just wildly confidence-inspiring to be in an organization that prioritizes teacher retention. I hear from teachers that just saying that out loud and having it on the goals as something that is as important as student

achievement makes them feel valued. They are not a commodity in service of student achievement, but they are part of the process. And as human beings, the organization values them.

Gabrielle and the other teachers at Angel on the other hand did not agree with either Antonia's nor her principal's thoughts although Gabrielle did see the value in working with senior leaders saying,

[Central Office] feels so far removed from teachers, it feels like we have to go through principals to get to them, I would like to get to know them as well. If you know your teachers you will know what makes them happy. I have no idea who is at [regional] headquarters...that is important to me...because I want to feel like I am being heard and sometimes it feels like everything that is being voiced stops at the principal level.

This divide between administrator and teacher perceptions of communication with teachers is a key finding, what one group considers an abundance of exemplary communication is equivalent to radio silence for another person, clearly there is room for improvement of communication channels here, since all parties agree that the message of teacher appreciation will be well received.

### **Teacher stayers make their retention decision in the Spring**

Another example of a misperception between Principal Cheslie and central administrator Antonia and the teachers at Angel was when teachers made final decisions to return to their teaching roles. The administrators were convinced that teachers made this decision as early as Thanksgiving break in November, Antonia said, "My theory is that everyone starts thinking about it before Thanksgiving, and then they talk to their families at Thanksgiving, and by January most people know whether or not they're likely to stay or go."

Cheslie thought the same process occurred but during the winter break. Based on interviews with the teachers neither administrator was correct on both the timing and the process of the decision to stay or leave. Mary nearly decided to leave the next year over



spring break but couldn't bear leaving her students. Gabrielle considered leaving the following year over spring break and in April but decided not to leave. Neither teacher consulted at length with their family and both generally went into the decision on their own. Steve made his decision to return in the springtime because that was when he had more data on how many of his special education students were planning on returning to the charter school the following year.

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The following eight findings were consistent across all three teacher interviews as key factors that were a component of their annual decision to stay on with the school or to leave:

1. The importance of trust and the feeling of being supported in their work from the administration
2. The teachers' deep belief in the mission of their school
3. The importance of working with students from low income backgrounds
4. The strong relationships that the teachers had built with students over their time teaching
5. The value that the teachers placed on their students' academic performance, particularly in the pursuit of college preparation
6. The valued relationships that teachers held with their colleagues
7. The opportunity to impact colleagues' development and learning
8. The long hours of the job and the impetus to leave the school that the weight of these hours brought to their decision-making process.

Findings that were consistent across two of the three teachers interviewed included the opportunity to consistently improve their practice via feedback and/ or professional

development, the importance of teachers being consistently acknowledged and appreciated by leaders, and the fear of having to start anew at another school. Findings related to only one of the three teachers were; the importance of salary on their retention decision, the impact of the TCP, and the length of the commute to the school.

There were four findings related to gaps between the perspectives of administrators and teachers on what mattered when it came to teachers' decisions to stay with the school; the value of salary, the teacher career pathway's influence, a gap between perceptions of district level praise for teachers, and the timing of when teachers made their decisions. Administrators believed that salary concerns had been allayed with a recent change to the salary scale in a prior year. However, one teacher felt otherwise and for the other two this was a moot point, as salary was not as important to them as other variables. Administrators also thought that the teacher career pathway was a key, perhaps the key component to teachers' interest in returning to work for Eagle year after year. However only one teacher cited the pathway as something that they were aware of and one of their top variables in their decision-making process. Finally, administrators believed that teachers made decisions about where to work the following year in the fall as they headed into their vacation, but all of the teachers interviewed made this decision in the spring.

The issue of teacher retention at Angel College Preparatory and across the Eagle network is an issue which receives considerable time and resources from district and school level leadership. The teachers were all committed to the school's mission, to their students and to one another but in listening to them one could not help but believe that they were running a sprint and not a marathon and that the clock was ticking loudly on their sprinting. All three of the teacher stayers interviewed at Angel College Prep had actively considered leaving the school at one time or another and all of them felt considerable strain from the

amount of hours that they worked, a fact that was not lost on district teacher retention leader Antonia, nor Principal Cheslie.

Cheslie tried to combat the effect of the long hours by actively working to “take non teaching tasks off of teachers’ plates.” Antonia the district administrator, was leading work around helping teachers learn the skills of “holding boundaries, letting go, relying on peers, and keeping things in perspective.” Whether these efforts or trainings would have an impact or not is hard to say given the previously mentioned mission focus that the teacher stayer brought to their work. At the time of this writing all three teachers are planning on returning to the school for the 2018-2019 school year.

## **Chapter 5: Case Study #2; Queen Schools, Lion College Prep**

### **NECMO DESCRIPTION**

The Queen NECMO charter school network has 209 schools across the US in 31 regions serving more than 87,000 students. Per the organization's national website 95% of the students it serves across all of its regions nationwide are African American or Latino. 88% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and 17% are labeled English Language Learners. The organization was founded in Texas and has received national recognition and accolades for its academic performance while simultaneously engendering criticism from multiple educational leaders (Ravitch, 2016; Lack, 2009). In the local region of the Queen network, student demographics roughly align to the network's national demographics. The region has 5,000 students and per the 2016-2017 TEA TAPR report 92.8% of the student body identifies as Latino, 3.7% identifies as African-American and 2.6% of students identify as white. 88% of the local Queen region's students receive a free or reduced price lunch and in a much greater occurrence than the network's national data, 48.5% of students are considered English Language Learners. Per TEA, 64% of students are considered at risk, the second highest rate of the three networks in this study. See Table 8 for regional and school demographic data.

Queen Schools has struggled with teacher retention per national data and also within specific regions that have multiple schools. The organization's current website notes that in 2016 73% of teachers returned to the organization from the previous year, and that 67% of teachers returned to their teaching position. In the local region per TEA district data the teacher retention rate was 69.8%. See Table 9 for regional network teacher demographic and retention data.

Queen schools are considered to be a NECMO as evidenced by language on the district website proclaiming it as a school that will “empower students to thrive in and graduate from college” and where, “there are no excuses.” The website includes a statement that aligns to the credos of other NECMO schools reading, “We believe that an excellent college-prep education will set students up for success in whatever life path they choose. Our students complete college at a rate that is above the national average for all students and four times higher than that of students from similar economic backgrounds.”

The website also includes photos of school alumni attending prestigious colleges and universities and video clips of alumni who have graduated from college talking about their journey and the impact that the school had on their life and career. Teachers are also highlighted on the website in a number of ways including in a statement that reads, “Highly effective teachers and leaders; Effective teachers set high expectations, believe in every student’s unlimited potential, and are equipped with the training, tools, and resources to maximize their success in the classroom” (Queen website).

Statements like this one are meant to attract teacher applicants to the organization. With under 70% teacher retention at both the national and local regional level the Queen network has publicly recognized that it is interested in improving its teacher retention. According to the regional chief talent officer Jane, the school district is participating in multiple strategies to increase teacher retention including teacher career pathways and increased pay as well as a superintendent-teacher listening tour.

Table 8: Queen Network and Lion College Prep Teacher & Administrator Data

| <u>NECMO</u>           | <u>Annual<br/>Teacher<br/>Turnover<br/>(%)</u> | <u>Avg.<br/>Years<br/>Teaching<br/>Exp w<br/>district.</u> | <u>Beginning<br/>teachers<br/>%</u> | <u>1-5 years<br/>teaching<br/>experience<br/>%</u> | <u>Exp of<br/>principal w<br/>district/</u> | <u>Exp of<br/>assistant<br/>principal w<br/>district/</u> |
|------------------------|--|--|-------------------------------------|--|---|---|
| State of Texas         | 16.4%  | 7.2 years  | 8.1%                                | 27.3%  | 12.2 years                                  | 10.1 years  |
| Queen Schools (region) | 30.2%  | 1.4 years  | 7.6%                                | 56.4%  | 4.6 years                                   | 3.0 years   |
| Lion College Prep      | 11%<br>(Principal reported)                    | 1.9 years  | 12.0%                               | 44.0%  | 4.0 years                                   | 3.0 years   |

*Source: Texas Education Agency 2016-2017 TAPR Report*

Table 9: 2016-2017 Queen Schools & Lion College Prep Student Demographic Data

| <u>NECMO</u>                  | <u>%<br/>Students<br/>Latino/<br/>Hispanic</u> | <u>%<br/>Students<br/>African<br/>American</u> | <u>%<br/>Students<br/>White</u> | <u>% Student s<br/>Asian</u> | <u>% Students<br/>At Risk</u> | <u>% Student s<br/>Econ Dis</u> |
|-------------------------------|--|--|---------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| State of Texas                | 52.4%  | 12.6%  | 28.1%                           | 4.2%                         | 50.3%                         | 59.0%                           |
| Queen Public Schools (Region) | 92.8%  | 3.7%   | 2.6%                            | 0.2%                         | 64%                           | 88%                             |
| Lion College Prep             | 93.8%  | 4.1%   | 1.6%                            | 0%                           | 49.8%                         | 89.9%                           |

*Source: Texas Education Agency 2016-2017 TAPR Report*

## **SCHOOL DESCRIPTION**

Lion College Prep serves students 436 students in 5th to 8th grade, of which 89.9% receive a free or reduced-price lunch, 93.8% are Latino- Hispanic, 4% are African American, and 2% are white. These racial and low-income student demographic data points are similar to other schools in the study. 49.8% of Lion students are labeled at risk which is the lowest rate for each of the schools in the study. Like all schools in this study Lion has received an overall “Met Standard” rating from the TEA, the school also received 7 of the 7 available distinctions awarded to schools of its size by the state<sup>32</sup>.

The school is led by Hailey, a gregarious principal in her 4<sup>th</sup> year in a row of leading the school. Hailey has been lauded by both district leadership and the teachers at her school

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<sup>32</sup> TEA Distinctions Report for Lion College Prep Campus.

for her ability to retain teachers. This past year 97% of the school's teachers elected to stay with the school. (Note, that this figure represents teachers who taught in 2016-2017 and elected to remain for 2017-2018, the TEA data reflects the prior change from 2015-2016 to 2016-2017.) Hailey sees a direct correlation between the tenure of teachers and the health of the school's culture and ultimately the academic performance of the students.

#### **INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS—DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR AND SCHOOL PRINCIPAL**

I interviewed five individuals within the Queen network, the principal of Lion College Prep and three teachers on the staff there as well as the Chief Talent Officer who worked out of the central office. All interviewees were white females, which was somewhat reflective of the overall staffing demographics for the campus where 56% of teachers are white and 80% are female (Initial interview requests with individuals that would have established a more diverse group of teachers were canceled due to teacher commitments.) Interviews were conducted in order of staff hierarchy beginning with chief talent officer, followed by the principal, followed by the three teachers. Both of the interviews of the two district administrators were conducted at the Lion College Prep Campus.

#### **Jane, Chief Talent Officer, Queen Schools**

Jane is a white woman in her mid-thirties who serves as the Chief Talent Officer at Queen Schools in the region; she leads all areas of human resources including teacher recruitment and retention and has done this work for the past five years. As part of this work she has created a Teacher Career Pathway (TCP) system. Before working at Queen, she had previously worked with AmeriCorps, and Communities and Schools. Jane has never worked as a classroom teacher or school principal in a charter school or traditional public school, but has had experience working in schools through social justice programs.



### **Hailey, Principal, Queen CMO, Lion College Preparatory**

Hailey is a married white woman in her mid-thirties. She is in her fourth year as principal at Lion College Preparatory in the Queen network. Prior to leading the campus, she worked at Lion as a special education coordinator for the campus for two years. Before arriving at Lion she worked as a special education teacher for seven years at the nearby traditional public school district. A large portion of her leadership vision for the school involves inclusion and the importance of supporting students from all backgrounds including special education students. Hailey has been lauded nationally in the Queen organization for her strong teacher retention results. This past year 29/30 teachers stayed on with the school for the 2017-2018 school year.

### **CMO DISTRICT LEVEL TEACHER RETENTION INITIATIVES**

Jane, the Chief Talent Officer in the region for Queen Schools explained that the district has been working on four different initiatives over the past two and a half years to retain teachers; an on campus day care center at each school; a shortened school day, a districtwide listening and feedback tour from the region's executive director, and the implementation of a teacher career pathway which included changes to teacher salaries. She also noted that the implementation of new curriculum in some grade levels could have an adverse effect on teacher retention, since the district requires teachers to write their own curriculum and/or at minimum bring together sources to create a curriculum if one had not been made by a prior teacher. All of these initiatives including the new curriculum, bringing dogs to campus, and child day care for teachers, were part of the overall vision of a "Sustainable people model." Jane described the implementation of the model saying,

In our first year, [the model] focused on kind of some big things like shortening the school day, opening a child care for employees, codifying the role of the teacher at Queen. In our second year, it was a little bit more like learning and maintenance. So we had-- every school had a focus area

that they were working on in terms of teacher retention. We did a bunch of time allocation studies. We continued to open more child cares. And in our third year, I think that we'll start honing in on the aspect of the role of the teacher where we see the most difference between how we ideally want teachers to spend their time and what we're actually seeing, so we kind of narrow our frame there...

When asked to reflect on what district retention initiatives may have had the most impact on teacher retention in the past two years and thus on the way in which teachers made their decisions about whether to return to the classroom or not, Jane was clear on how these initiatives had impacted the data stating,

So we're shortening the school day and opening the childcare, those were like two big shiny things we did. And it was the first year that teachers were placed on the [teacher career] pathway, so a bunch of people got salary bumps. I think that's what took us 62 to 72 [annual teacher retention]. It was like those three things. And I think it created a sense of, 'This organization is listening to me. This organization is getting better...

It was clear in speaking with both Jan and Hailey, the Lion College Prep principal, that teacher retention was important to both of them and that the district initiatives have had and would continue to presumably have an effect on teachers' decision making processes as they began the 2017-2018 academic year. This sentiment of the programs making a difference in teacher decision making was notable in how each administrator discussed both the programs that had already been implemented and completed, (e.g. childcare, length of school day, listening tour), and those that were still being improved upon such as the teacher career pathway and the creation of curriculums.

#### **District initiative—Day care for staff**

Both Hailey the Lion College Prep principal and Jane the district leader felt that the addition of day care centers at Queen schools were a needed and well received initiative that had a positive impact on teacher retention. Jane explained the need for day care centers at Queen schools and how they have been received stating,

...One of the things that we were hearing is that you can't have a family or work at Queen. And while statistically that wasn't true, we needed to draw attention to it... We [now] have a waiting list [for day care] at every campus. I would say that it was important to us to tell our employees this will be a very safe, very affordable child care... Our teachers love it and I think that it's allowed us-- even though so few are using it when you think of the total population, there's like 500 people and there's probably 50 who are enrolled in the child care overall, maybe like 15 at each site. Just knowing that it exists builds an interest for people ...and I think that has made a difference. In May or something, when I was looking at our leave statements, we had 35 people on leave... It would be difficult for someone to come and say you can't have a family and work at Queen because so many people do.

Hailey agreed with Jane's sentiment on the importance of the childcare centers, noting that she thought that they had more of a direct impact on teacher's decision making than the actual school curriculum.

#### **District retention initiative; Adjustment of the school day**

The decision to shorten the school day across the Queen schools was a difficult one for Jane and the central office administrative team. They were torn between the feedback that teachers were giving on the challenges of the longer hours at school and the needs they felt that students had to be in the classroom longer when they were not on grade level. Jane explained this dilemma stating,

So we shortened the school day by 30 minutes a day, which is not a lot when you think about it on a daily basis but it made a pretty big difference. It is 2 and a half hours of learning time that was a hard decision. Our kids could probably use it, and yet, if their teachers are not staying, we know a high quality teacher has the biggest impact on kids' learning so we need them to stay longer and get more practice. So it was a tough decision... I think it was 8 hours and now it's 7 and a half.

The decision to shorten the school day was made before the 2016-2017 school year so at the time of this study teachers had experienced a full year with the new schedule. Principal Hailey certainly felt that the change was the right decision stating that the change was "huge" and that she believed that the shorter school day was the second most critical

factor coming from the district office that influenced teacher decision making following the teacher career pathway and its ongoing implementation.

### **District retention initiative; End of year survey and superintendent meetings**

In her role as Chief Human Assets officer Jane came to the realization that she had to improve communication between central office leadership and teachers. It was not enough to build new initiatives that would support teacher retention such as adding childcare to schools, she had to also publicize the work in a way that stuck and gave teachers concrete evidence that the leadership in central office was taking action on retaining teachers, that the regional office leadership was listening. She articulated this perspective saying,

I would say that what I've learned about the sustainability conversation is it's as much PR as it is real action... The other thing I learned is you need something shiny. And I think that goes into this question of how teachers make sense of the district-level work, is like, one, they don't make a lot of sense of it because your message never, in my experience, gets there unless it's repeated a billion times. We just don't have the space to repeat that message a billion times because we have other work to do. The message, just the fact that you're working on something, it doesn't really matter to people unless they see something. It has to be big and easy to grasp so that everybody knows what it is.

One way in which Jane and her team executed on this strategy of both repeating the message that teachers were important and giving teacher tangible evidence of action was by having the superintendent meet with each teacher who voiced interest in on the regional survey. Jane described this saying, "We put on an end-of-year survey the year before, 'Is there anything you'd like to tell Pete Peters?' And he met with every single person that had a concern."

When I asked Jane about the effectiveness of the strategy in terms of the actual impact on teacher decision making on whether to return to the district or not she noted that

the superintendent's listening meetings along with the advent of the shorter school day, the creation of the TCP and the day cares really helped to decrease the number of teacher departures. She said, "If I had to guess [why more teachers are choosing to stay], it's that Pete met with all those people. People started feeling heard. And then we did three big things that everyone was like, 'Oh, look at what they're doing! This place does care about teachers.'"

### **District retention initiative; Curriculum creation**

Principal Hailey noted that one factor that she anticipated would influence teacher decision making on returning to the Lion College Prep campus was the amount of work that teachers would have to do on their curriculum. Central office leader Jane made similar comments after conducting a two year study of Queen teachers' use of time during a seven day week. She found that teachers were spending nearly 63% of their time over seven days planning or executing lessons with the pain point being the lesson planning itself not the actual teaching. She said,

Teachers are struggling to really efficiently plan and prepare for lessons, whether they are writing their own lesson plans or using a curriculum that they have to internalize. They're just spending a lot of time. And our teachers that are more proficient, have good systems, have stayed in the same content area, they're like, 'Mondays are when I do this. Tuesdays is when I do this. I write all my exit tickets on this day.' You know, they just know how they do it. And other teachers are kind of just like, 'I have so much lesson planning to do!'

Since the Queen network does not provide specific curriculum materials to all teachers in a given content area, for example all 6<sup>th</sup> grade math teachers, principals must determine the curriculum materials that teachers will be held accountable to producing on a weekly basis. At Lion College Prep principal Hailey had identified the additional work

that this created for teachers who had not already created their curriculum in the past. She said,

The curriculum team has a lot of potential for influencing people's decisions. When there is an entirely new curriculum rolled out, that is a point when teachers start to think about leaving...we provide teachers an annual scope and sequence and unit plans, but they have to make all of their daily lesson plans. So if we do a completely new curriculum, teachers are going to have to write daily lesson plans every day all over again vs. tweaking and perfecting things that they had before. Teachers don't tend to mind doing that when they've not had to do it for a few years. But if they were like in their first year or even their second year and now they're going to have to do that again, it's a huge leaver factor. People are like, 'No, I'm not doing that.'

Hailey's intuition proved to be accurate via the interviews with teachers, particularly 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher Eve, whose perspective on curriculum will be shared later in this chapter.

### **District retention initiative; Teacher Career Pathway (TCP) with salary adjustments**

The Teacher Career Pathway or "TCP" as Queen administrators and teachers refer it to it, is the key component of the Queen schools' teacher retention strategy. Unlike the longer school day and the implementation of day cares at school sites which were one time events, the TCP has been consistently updated at Queen campuses since its implementation two years earlier. The 2017-2018 school year marks the third year of the program. District human capital leader Jane is the lead architect for the program and has closely monitored data on teacher departures as the program has been rolled out. She believes that the program is having a strong effect on retaining teachers at Queen, particularly stronger more experienced teachers. Hailey also believes that the program is working and is the number one district initiative that teachers consider when making a decision to stay at Lion College Prep. Hailey also believes that the salary component of the TCP is critical in helping

teachers see a longer term career at her school than they would without the program in place. Here are some of their thoughts on the TCP beginning with Jane's description of the purpose of the program:

The tagline of the Teacher Career Pathway is "Get better, stay longer," so it's kind of built on this idea that everybody likes to feel like they're moving forward in their career as their skills grow. And that helps us to stay longer. But in addition, the more hours of practice we get in our roles, the better we get. So you can see it as an inverse, "Get better, stay longer. And stay longer, get better." And so it's meant to recognize and reward teachers for performance. There's three pieces to it. It's student achievement, it's planning instruction, which is kind of like your typical teacher actions, and then itself and others, which is professionalism and team work.

Jane goes on to explain how the program works noting that there are different components that contribute to a teacher's rating within the TCP saying,

Teachers get evaluated over the course of the year in a couple different ways. Probably most importantly is their students' growth and achievement. They have a set of goals that are aligned to that course and what's expected of kids in that course. And then they get placed on the Pathway at one of the first three stages: novice teacher, teacher, or advanced teacher, and then they can move up from there based on performance. And then with each stage, there's differentiation -- increasing compensation, increasingly differentiated professional development...

Hailey offered her view from the principalship on why the TCP matters to her and teachers at Lion College Prep. She said,

Essentially the Teacher Career Pathway allows people to be paid based on their performance. So their first year is a placement year wherein their performance on certain goals equates to placement on a stage, and each stage has a different starting salary. So teachers are able to place on either stage 1, stage 2, or advanced.

Both Jane and Hailey noted that the salary component of the TCP was likely very important to teachers with both administrators feeling that teachers were influenced to stay because of the emergence of the TCP and in particular the salary component. Hailey said,

“The starting salary for an advanced teacher is \$57,000 which is really great for teachers in this area.” Jane added,

In exit interviews, people aren’t saying like “Oh, I just can’t pay the bills in this job. I need to go work elsewhere.” They’re saying more like “I’m tired, and so working elsewhere, I’ll make the same amount of money, but I’ll be less tired.” So we tried to really invest in base salary. I’m sure you’ve seen examples of other Teacher Career Pathways where there’s a lot of, I would say, pretty complicated bonus systems. Ours is just straight up, when you’re at this, your new base salary is this...I had a teacher say to me “I never had thought about buying a house before, and now thanks to TCP, I’m thinking about it.”

Hailey made it clear that money was important to teachers on her team even if they were not always quick to discuss it. She said,

I tell people all of the time that teachers do not have to be so altruistic that they don’t consider money. I was like, “You get to consider money. People want to buy homes and take vacations and save, and it is okay to consider money, and you now have strong earning potential in your role [due to the TCP].” And people have been really motivated by that. I think my staff definitely sees themselves as a little bit different and a little bit better than the rest of the region -- not in a “we’re better than you” but like we try to insulate ourselves from some of the drama happening at other schools. So my teachers appreciate the district-level retention strategies, especially the TCP.

Jane also noted that higher performing teachers are staying as based on TCP student achievement data saying,

[I can] say that 18 of the teachers that are getting best results are staying next year. And I can’t say that’s because of the Teacher Career Pathway, but at least I know who those 21 teachers are that are getting our best results. Before, it was kind of like just regrettable versus non-regrettable, and that’s a lot of bias...

Clearly both administrators, one at the regional office and one a school principal feel that the TCP at Queen is a key factor if not the key variable in teacher’s decision making process that the regional office had been able to create and institute.



### **School level teacher retention initiative; celebrations & gatherings**

It was clear that the culture among the adults did not take place by accident as Hailey detailed a number of different events, gifts, and traditions that she felt fostered a culture of respect for teaching and even the importance of teacher retention itself. For example, teachers were all invited to a dinner at her home twice a year- and they showed up. She describes how these events show her appreciation for the teachers but also provide a forum for the adults in the organization to engage with one another in ways that they would not be able to do in a crowded middle school hallway. Hailey says,

So I think [the dinners are a way] that I kind of get to know people, and I get to know their significant others, and I tease the new boyfriends. I always joke that there's like a vetting process like, "Oh, are you bringing so and so to the staff party? Because I don't think I've given my approval just yet." Yeah. I don't know, it's kind of organic. I think the bottom line is I really do love my teachers.

Another way that Hailey builds culture among her teachers and shows them how important they are is through the giving of gifts. Here she describes the annual holiday administrator gift to teachers:

We have an annual tradition where administration gets together around the holidays and we make a handmade craft and we also give all of our teachers a handmade gift. And we're really intentional about taking pictures of us at the little crafting party and putting them on Facebook so the teachers know that we're doing it. And we keep it a big secret. It's kind of silly, but teachers really get into it.

Hailey clearly believes in the importance of celebrating and praising the teaching staff. She also does paper plate awards at the end of every school year where every teacher leaves a team meeting with a specific award noted on a paper plate. She also has "lots of intentional programming for joy through that February slump." Which includes breakfast tacos and key updates about the following year such as the announcement that a new building will be opening. This is all intentionally done with the consideration of insuring

that teachers return for the upcoming school year. Despite the fact that no teachers interviewed explicitly mentioned the holiday gifts, the tacos, nor the February announcements Hailey is clearly having an impact on the teachers' decision-making process as evidenced by the school's 97% teacher retention rate.

#### **INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS—TEACHERS**

Of the three teachers interviewed, two were married with one of those teachers having very young children. Most of the individuals interviewed were in their late twenties or mid thirties with the exception being the PE teacher who was in her late 40s. All of the team members interviewed attended top ranked colleges or universities (see Appendix C on interviewee colleges), but none of the nation's most selective colleges per US News and World Report<sup>33</sup> and no teachers had gone through the Teach For America Program although one had been certified by the New Teacher Project. All teacher participants had taught at the school for at least three years with one having been there since the school opened nine years earlier. All of the teachers interviewed were planning on returning to the school year to teach the following year.

#### **Stacy, Middle School Special Education Teacher, Queen CMO—Lion College Prep**

Stacy is a white woman in her late 20s who teaches middle school special education at the Lion College Prep campus within the Queen CMO. Prior to working at Lion she was a social worker in the mid west after having graduated with her masters in social work. She was certified through an online certification program. Stacy is in her 4<sup>th</sup> year teaching, with all of her teaching experience at Lion. Like some other special education teachers at charter schools Stacy has “looped” with her students from grade to grade each year. She has now

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/rankings/lowest-acceptance-rate>

worked with her current 8<sup>th</sup> grade special education students since they were in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Student and colleague relationships have been and remain extremely important parts of her teaching experience.

**Eve, 8<sup>th</sup> Grade English Teacher, Queen CMO—Lion College Prep**

Eve is a white woman in her mid-thirties who teaches 8<sup>th</sup> grade English. She is married and has two young children. She has previously taught, fifth, sixth, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade English as well as ESL classes to college freshmen. Prior to working at Lion she had taught at a charter school on the east coast where she heard of the Queen CMO and was able to observe at charter schools in the city, thus prompting her decision to apply for the role at Lion College Prep when moving to Texas. She has worked at Lion for four years all of them teaching English, with the past two years in 8<sup>th</sup> grade English.

**Lee, Middle School PE Teacher, Queen CMO—Lion College Prep**

Lee is a married white female in her late 40s who teaches, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade PE at Lion College Prep. She came to Lion having taught elementary school PE after in another region of the state. She chose to teach at the Lion campus because she was drawn to the mission statement and the ability to continue to work with students from low-income backgrounds. Lee has taught PE for more than 20 years, the last nine of which have been at Lion College Prep where she was one of the founding teachers. Over her tenure she has seen the school transition from one with extremely long hours including multiple Saturday School requirements for teachers, to one with lesser hours and extracurricular requirements. Lee believes that she will continue to work at Lion until she retires unless the school was to undergo a dramatic leadership change. As a veteran teacher she has worked to keep younger teachers on the campus because she sees the importance

of retaining teachers but also recognizes that some people realize that teaching is not for them.

## **FINDINGS ALIGNED ACROSS ALL TEACHERS**

### **Principal Effectiveness Matters**

A strong and dependable principal matters to teacher stayers. Based on their responses during the interview it was clear that the school principal's work was one of the core reasons why teacher stayers at Lion College Prep have continued to remain with the school. All three teachers who were interviewed at Lion explicitly noted the principal's leadership style and their personal relationship with her as one of the top three reasons that they choose to remain teaching at the school.

This sentiment is reflected in last year's teacher retention data where 97% of the teachers returned for the 2016-2017 school year. All parties who were interviewed included Hailey herself (albeit a bit bashfully) noted the importance of her leadership style on teacher decision making regarding whether to stay or leave the school. This is very telling regarding the influence of the principal on the campus, particularly since Jane, VP of Human Capital made it clear that across the Queen district 98% of teachers are managed by an assistant principal and not the actual principal. This is true at Lion as well where principal Hailey only manages one teacher directly and instead manages the administrative team.

Despite this lack of direct influence via one on one check ins or observations, Hailey has built relationships with each of the teachers at her school through formal scheduled meetings and informal interactions in hallways and classrooms both of which she described in her interview. She also pays a great deal of attention to individual teachers needs. She describes her focus on teacher retention as a focus on building intentional

relationships and believes that her focus on individual relationships leads to a stronger school culture. She says, “I think everybody stays because they very much believe that this is a healthy community. People will tell you that everyone here believes that we have a really strong staff culture.”

It is hard to argue with her logic when listening to teachers on the staff. Here are some of their comments on Hailey’s leadership style and their belief in her efforts. Some teachers even considered leaving the school due to traffic but thought better of it when thinking of Hailey!

I really like, genuinely do like my principal...I think she’s got our best interests in mind. There are other Queen schools. I actually moved last spring so I’m living walking distance from another Queen school. The thought crossed my mind, the commute would be easier, but I like it here. (Eve 8<sup>th</sup> grade English)

I love our principal and everybody here...it’s worth the drive [across the city]...Our principal is very supportive, I actually got her hired here. (Lee 5-8<sup>th</sup> grade PE Teacher)

I cannot say this enough, I love my principal. I know for a fact that I wouldn’t be here if she wasn’t here, that’s what I’ll say. ... I think that is why people stay because they believe in Hailey...I would love to continue working for her in definitely a higher capacity. (Stacy Middle School Special Education Teacher)

And here are Hailey’s thoughts on her own practice and impact on the teachers’ decision point:

I do think leadership is a big deal. I think that there are some people who stay here because of me. That’s like weird for me to admit, but I do think that it’s true. I think if I were to leave, there would be a great amount of turnover -- partially because of me, but partially because it would be natural transition point...

When digging deeper into teacher responses regarding Hailey's leadership both Torres' (2016) theory of relational trust, and Elmore's (2008) theory of reciprocity are evident in how Hailey operates. For example multiple teachers believe that she operates with their personal regard in mind, a key component of the theory of relational trust and that she provides time or reciprocity to achieve the work expected of them. Eighth grade English teacher Eve says,

I kind of feel like she is looking out for me...She makes sure that we have our planning time, she cares about people as people, if she sees they're having a hard time and she needs to cover their class or whatever she's more than willing to step in I've definitely worked for principals that I didn't feel were looking out for me very much, and I didn't feel as invested in the schools and have since left the school. It definitely would factor in [her leadership on my decision to stay].

And long time PE teacher Lee adds, "She's gone into other people's [classrooms] and covered classes. During October when everybody's kind of in a slump if we have a meeting and she sees energy is low sometimes it's like go home and take care of yourselves. And then we can meet about this at another time."

Another area of relational trust and reciprocity important to the teachers interviewed at Lion College Prep was competence. Special Education teacher Stacy also felt that principal Hailey delivered in this area noting that when she needed advice or insights into how to better support her students that Hailey was quick to point out special education tactics that could help her students and improve her practice in working with them. Similarly Eve felt that she could request support on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade English curriculum, but also had autonomy in putting together the curricular program for her course.

### **School culture matters to teacher stayers**

One of the themes that consistently surfaced in interviews with all team members at the Queen network was the importance of culture on the Lion College Prep campus. It

seemed that when discussing the culture on the campus the Lion team was generally referring to the culture among the adults on the campus and the ways in which they worked with one another and worked with students. There was some mention of student culture but this was mostly in reference to the ways that adults engaged with students. All three teachers interviewed repeatedly mentioned the culture as a key reason why they enjoyed working at the school and why they felt the school was successful. This was evident in the data with only one teacher leaving before the 17-18 school year (29/30 returning) and that teacher leaving due to a family emergency requiring him to move to Oklahoma. It was also evident in the ways that teachers described culture on their campus and at times the way that they spoke about Hailey. Here are some of their comments:

I think this school is a fun place to work at and we're very supported... The principal pranks me thinking she's going to hide something on April Fool's Day or just the other teachers. And we can joke around with each other in meetings. We can say a joke and everybody laughs and still gets back to business and doesn't get in trouble. (Lee, PE teacher)

My interactions with administrators are really positive. I have administrators in my classroom probably ... almost every day someone steps in and it might be just to grab a student, or it might be just to poke their head in..... I feel really good about this school. The atmosphere here is very calm, which is good for me. I appreciate having a pretty calm atmosphere. (Eve 8<sup>th</sup> grade English Teacher)

I think that's why people stay because they A, believe in Hailey, B, believe in our system and C, know that they're really making some major change in our kid's lives. (Stacy Middle School Special Education Teacher)

Clearly the teachers interviewed feel good about their leader and the culture that has been created at their school.

### **District Mission brings teachers to the school and remains important to them**

All of the teachers interviewed noted the school's mission statement as a reason for why they chose to teach at Lion College Prep and to remain on the staff. The mission

statement for the school network reads, “Queen [Schools] empowers students to thrive in and graduate from college, choose their paths, and positively impact their communities.” Implicit in the mission statement is also the premise of working with students from low income backgrounds. Veteran PE teacher Lee explained how she was drawn to the school because of its mission: “We didn’t have charter schools [where I previously taught] so I didn’t really know what a charter school was. They told me the mission statement [when I was learning about the school] which- I’ve always taught at Title One schools -so just knowing the mission was very appealing...”

Lee was a founding teacher at the school and has remained on the staff because of her focus—among many reasons—on continuing to serve students from low-income backgrounds.

Middle School special education teacher Stacy described how the mission was important to her on a day-to-day basis. She equated the challenge of the mission as one that not all teachers may be cut out for saying, “You have got to have a very, I would say specific drive to do this job. If you don’t care about a population of kids who are really suffering. If you haven’t maybe I would say struggled at a time in elementary or middle school, whatever, don’t do this job.”

Eighth grade English teacher Eve noted that preparing students for the mission of getting to college was a very important part of the work for her at Lion College Prep, she said,

I want to be able to help [the students]. A lot of them come in just learning to speak English or maybe not having had the greatest reading instruction up to this point...maybe they’re coming in in the second, third, fourth grade reading level. Especially in eighth grade, I think it means a lot to me to be able to help them now, because I know that, “I’m getting you ready for that time when now colleges will start looking at your grades and your GPA.”



The teachers not only valued the mission of the school, they valued the work that the mission required and described the achievement of their students in the classroom as a critical piece of their reason for remaining at the school.

### **Student achievement matters and leads to teacher retention for stayers**

Each teacher interviewed noted that it was important for her to see her students achieving academically. This took different forms for each teacher in part because of the different content areas they taught. For 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher Eve, the love of reading was evidence that her students were learning, and this mattered to her. She said, “It’s a pretty proud feeling when I can get a whole classroom of kids to just sit there and actually read silently to themselves, like genuinely, like they’re all looking at the book and they’re all genuinely reading and it’s not because I’ve threatened them...”

For physical education teacher Lee, she felt like students were achieving when she saw them improve their abilities in her class over time. She said, “And I thought what have I gotten myself into? But just seeing the kids, their growth from fifth grade all the way through eighth grade just like, these extra hours and all this extra time is worth it.”

For Special Education teacher Stacy, seeing her students’ academic growth over time was very rewarding. She described her students and the impact their achievements had on her saying,

...These are like my little children and they’ve grown academically so much and emotionally and socially and I actually get to see that happen every year. The work I do with them is so meaningful. The relationships I have with them and all of the growth that I’ve seen them make- that is what makes my job really great.

This intersection of deep teacher student relationships and the achievement of students within each teacher’s classroom was a theme that came up with all three teachers. Each teacher interviewed had developed relationships with their students that were

important to them even after the close of the academic year when a new group of students arrived.

### **Strong long-term student relationships matter to teacher stayers**

Like other NECMOs in the study the importance of teacher's relationships with students at Lion College Prep was a key part of the teachers' meaning making as they wrestled with the decision to return to the school to teach another year. Particularly for the students who were "looping" with their teacher and for those teachers who had the chance to see their younger pupils grow up at the school the impact of student relationships forged with teachers in the classroom has a strong impact on teacher decision-making. Two of the three teachers interviewed at Lion College Prep for this study described how their students' growth and achievements contributed to their own self efficacy as a teacher as well as their interest in remaining at the school to see their students progress through each grade level. The third teacher did not elaborate on the importance of long term student relationships in her explicit decision-making process to stay with the school but did describe the importance of student achievement in her own satisfaction with the work. Here are some of the comments on long-term student teacher relationships from the two teachers who discussed it in detail as a core reason they stay on at Lion College Prep:

It's more about the students. I have little siblings that are now my ex-students that graduated that are now in college, I have their little siblings and just knowing the families and everything just makes me keep coming back. Because they look forward to seeing me when they come to visit and the parents are excited when teachers are staying...[I feel most effective] seeing their growth from fifth to eighth grade and then once they get into high school when they're coming back and still playing on sports teams or doing after school clubs that you know, involve lifting weights or going to a gym. Seeing that they are taking their health into their own hands and staying healthy. (Lee, physical education teacher)

[The students I work with] have grown academically so much and emotionally and socially and I actually get to see that happen every year. The work I do with them is so meaningful. The relationships I have with them and all of the growth that I've seen them make, that is what makes my job really great...I have been through a lot with these students. They came here as ... I call them literal babies when they're in fifth grade because they're so tiny. They've needed a lot of help and guidance and structure...Even when it was really hard and challenging I always found the end goal in my head being like, 'I'm building a character for them and I am building a life hopefully that they will have to lean on,' meaning a college degree, whatever else it is. That's why [I stay]. That's why with my students. Love them... (Stacy, middle school special education teacher)

### **Teacher stayers value their personal relationships with members of their teams**

On top of the school wide culture that Hailey has constructed at Lion College Prep between herself and the teachers, and the positive student- teacher culture, it is also clear that there is a strong culture between the teachers outside of the realm of the administrators and students. Each teacher interviewed cited their colleagues as one of the top three factors within their meaning making when deciding if they should return for the upcoming year. There were two positive attributes to the school culture among colleagues that contributed to teachers' decision-making process to stay or leave the school. The first was the baseline collegiality between colleagues; this was evident in speaking with each of the teachers interviewed. All three teachers had positive comments on the ways that the teachers on their grade level teams and across the school engaged with one another. Here are some of their key comments on the topic:

I love my colleagues. Another reason why I think I have wanted to continue at Lion College Prep is because of the people that I work with. I've never met a brighter more intellectual bunch of people in one setting. I just think it's really powerful when you have a lot of very motivated, passionate, very smart people in a group for one kind of cause... It's really nice [a]couple of my really good friends who I also have worked with very closely on a grade level team actually live really close to me. Seeing them outside of work is really easy and really wonderful and makes me really happy. They're

wonderful people. I want to be around people who make me better and they do. (Stacy 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher)

I got the other PE teacher hired here as well. So the people I work with I'm really good friends with... Teaching with some of them for six or seven years, we're friends outside of school too. So just knowing that I'm here and I can help them, because they come to me sometimes for support and the kids look up to me or respect me helping them out, it makes it enjoyable coming here knowing that I've also helped out an adult. (Lee physical education teacher)

I feel pretty invested in staying here because I like the group of people that I'm working with... I know, just from working with them, that we have a good rapport. I enjoy talking to them. They're easy to be around. When we go out for staff happy hours and stuff I have a great time. They're funny. They are people that I appreciate working with. (Eve 8<sup>th</sup> Grade English teacher)

The second component to teachers' meaning making that focused on the relationships between teachers had to do with their actual decision-making process. When making their own decision to stay or leave the school team, they actually thought about who was coming back for the upcoming school year, particularly those teachers on their grade level team. Special education teacher Stacy explained that the path her colleagues were taking for the next year did not have an explicit impact on her decision but was certainly part of her process. She said,

It's definitely like, "If you're going to stay that's awesome. That's another incentive for me. That's another motivating factor for me." It's both ways. It's both ways. I'm very logical. I would never actually make a decision based on if someone was staying or not, but that helps. That for sure helps.

Eighth grade English Teacher Eve was not as explicit in describing how her colleagues' process impacted her own decision to remain with the school but she did note that colleagues were the third most important component of her decision making following two other factors, curriculum and the teacher career pathway which are discussed later in this chapter.

### **Having a shorter summer break impacts teacher decision on staying**

One topic that was surprising in both its appearance and its consistency across all three teacher interviewees was the teachers' desire to have a longer summer vacation. This factor was mentioned by all three teachers interviewed as a part of their decision-making process to remain at the school. One teacher even noted it as the fourth most important factor in her meaning making.

The Queen NECMO and thus the Lion College Prep Campus have a shorter summer vacation than the traditional public school in the area as well as other charter schools. This fact was not lost on the teachers interviewed at Lion College Prep, all of whom wanted central office leadership to advocate for a longer summer vacation. The teachers were quite aware of the pros and cons to increasing summer vacation particularly for their students. For example, Lee noted that,

I would like to say it would be nice to have a longer summer but I know that sometimes the students that we serve here need the extra push and so the summer school is important because once the school year starts... we don't have to go over expectations and routines, that's already taught in summer school.

Eighth grade English teacher Eve noted that there was a potential trade off in a longer summer given that the additional days were taxing on teachers and could lead to greater teacher burn out and thus more attrition. She also realized that the additional days of instruction could lead to greater student learning, noting that the Queen superintendent should consider what may ultimately be more beneficial to students in the long run; teachers retained, or additional student instruction. Finally, Stacy made it clear in her self-analysis of her decision making process that the length of the summer was a factor she considered each year but it was not the determining factor. Although the length of the summer was not an explicit district level initiative at the Queen network, given the interest from the teachers in the length of summer- a decision made at the district level- it is clear

that at Queen the district central office leadership team's decisions can have an impact on teachers' decisions to remain on or leave their school.

### **Challenge of long hours and burn out**

All three teachers interviewed at Queen noted that they had to consider the long hours that they put in at the school when making their annual decision on whether to return to the team or not. It was clear that each of the teachers weighed the number of hours they were working with more positive factors when coming to their retention decision. For example, Lee made it clear that she did not think of leaving the school and couldn't, "imagine doing anything else." However, she also acknowledged that working at Lion was very different than working at a traditional public school in regards to the time required. She described her transition to Lion saying, "Just coming from a public school and coming in, the extended hours. We've cut back on hours so we used to go from like seven until four, after four. Every other Saturday we had Saturday schools, I was kind of freaked out about the hours."

The specter of the long hours needed to work at Lion College Prep also seemed to stick with Stacy and Eve who both noted that they considered the amount of time that they needed to put into the work every year when they made their decision to stay at the school. Both teachers made it clear that for them it was still very much a decision point each year and that the long days were the reason staying on was not automatic. Stacy said,

You got to be crazy to do this job, but I also know that my crazy is being very proficient and organized and then also very detailed oriented, and also helping kids out. That's actually like really a lot of what I love all the time. I think [coming back again] comes down to when the [student] data crunching comes in and it's like 'that is very discouraging', but it's also like ... I've always been able to pick myself back up and that's good.

Eve noted that even though she thought the year was going great and she would likely stay, unlike Lee her decision was not completely made already. She said, “I’m thinking about [whether to stay or not] ... even now I’m thinking about next year. Just questioning is this what I would feel like doing again next year?”

Her questioning seemed to come from the overall level of intensity and effort needed to do the work of teaching at Lion College Prep on a day in and day out basis.

### **Engagement from district leadership matters via surveys to teacher stayers**

In each of the interviews with the teachers at Lion College prep three district initiatives were mentioned as having a smaller part of each teacher’s decision making than either the school principal, their colleagues, and/ or the teacher career pathway. All teachers mentioned the decreased timing of the school day that took place two years prior and all mentioned the school’s pro dog policy and on-site childcare centers as district initiative that they appreciated and also appreciated being informed of in advance of their implementation. The dog policy and on site daycare were both seen as good examples of the central office working to better support teachers and understanding the staff’s interests (dogs on campus) and needs (childcare for new parents). However, neither of these policies were actually influential in teacher’s decision-making process on whether to stay or leave the school.

All teachers interviewed agreed on the importance of clear ongoing communication coming from the central office to teachers as well the importance of being able to provide feedback to central office leaders. Interviewed teachers believed that being able to provide feedback on an annual survey provided them with the opportunity to have a voice in the school district as evidenced by some changes that were made following their feedback. For example, the shortening of the school day made teachers feel good about working at the

Queen network and that they were being heard. District level feedback loops were not a reason to come back to work at Lion College Prep the following year in and of themselves, but it seemed like the lack of their existence could be a reason not to return as all teachers thought about district communication at some level.

PE teacher Lee felt great about the information she received from and gave to the central office saying, “They’ve done really good...they always ask for feedback. So people giving feedback, we got a daycare, we got a shortened day, so our central office is great.” Stacy on the other hand felt like more could be done saying, “I think especially for the folks who’ve stayed longer than two years [central office leaders should] ask them what’s going well and what’s not...Just have a conversation. I think that could really help.” Eighth grade English teacher Eve explained that the communication was important due to the effort made. She said,

...It’s about the gesture. It’s just knowing that some one is thinking about that. It’s nice to know. They made an effort. This past year our last day was June 1st or June 2nd. Next year it’s going to be the last day of May so that we have all of June for vacation. I think psychologically that makes a big difference. It’s nice to know someone’s thinking about stuff like that.

#### **FINDINGS ALIGNED ACROSS SOME TEACHERS**

The following findings were consistent for two of the three teachers in the study as being influential on their decision to remain on with the team at Lion College Prep; the impact of the Teacher Career Pathway (TCP) and its salary component, the shortening of the school day, and the challenges of the commute from their home to the school. An additional factor that was very important to one teacher was the curriculum expectation and support provided by the school. This was the number one factor in making a decision to return for that teacher.



### **Stayer teachers are bought into the importance of the teacher career pathway and its salary adjustments**

The Queen network in the region has introduced a Teacher Career Pathway (TCP) system that had a very strong effect on the teachers in this study's decision to return to their classroom for the 2017-2018 school year. All three teachers interviewed understood the teacher career pathway's purpose and were aware of how it impacted their salary. Two teachers cited the teacher career pathway initiative as being in the top three most important factors in their decision to come back to teach.

As it is perhaps meant to be understood by teachers, the TCP at Lion College Prep resonated with the interviewed teachers in different ways, with one common underlying theme, the money involved in the TCP caused teachers to take notice. Each of them referenced the way that salary was incorporated into the TCP and how that factor influenced their decision to remain on with the school. For two of the teachers interviewed it was a very important factor, for another it was not. The teachers said,

We have gotten to the teacher career pathway for SPED finally, so a salary increase also was a really nice motivator... With each of my overall ratings for the year, if they are higher than XYZ, which they are, I will be able to get a salary increase...I can build my 401K and I can actually have a savings account. All of these things that I want to achieve on a personal, financial level that was really nice.... [The TCP] salary increase is maybe I'll go with a percentage. I would probably say it's 50% [as part of my decision to come back]. (Stacy middle school special education teacher)

I think the teacher career pathway would come second [as factor for staying with school district], especially since part of what's going to move me up on that pathway is student achievement. I can feel good about if I'm moving up on that, that students are achieving high scores. That's reflected in my salary as well. [The TCP and its salary] factors in a lot, especially with kids and the mortgage payment, daycare payment, all that kind of stuff. Whether or not I can keep teaching definitely depends a lot on salary. It was definitely one of the reasons that I thought about maybe moving into trying to do a PhD program or something else, because I've definitely had moments, especially in the last year trying to buy a house...where I was like, "Long

term, is a teaching salary something that my husband and I can raise our family on?" I'd say it factors in a lot. (Eve 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher)

I didn't get into teaching for the money that's for sure, so I mean, I care about meeting my goals and everything, but I care more about the fitness levels of students increasing or skill levels or them getting to know their health and nutrition. It's not money based. Don't get me wrong money's nice, if I'm going to get a bonus for meeting all my goals that's nice, but I'd still do the same work day in and day out even before TCP...(Lee middle school PE teacher)

In addition to the TCP salary adjustments, the presence of the TCP at the school influenced teachers' decision-making process via the goals that needed to be achieved to earn promotion on the pathway as well as the concrete recognition from administration towards teachers that the various pathway levels provided. This influence was seen in teacher's comments on the TCP during interviews. For example, Stacy stated,

I actually kind of need this as an almost 30 year old. I love my job. I work super hard. If I'm getting recognized in ways that it's really tangible for me to see, my ratings are going up, that's great. That's a wonderful motivator. Once I knew what my ratings would be overall...I made the decision [to return] in April, and then once I got my scores back in May I was like, 'Yes.'

Eve shared similar sentiments in her interview about the importance of the goals of the TCP influencing her decision to return to the classroom. She said,

Yeah, the [TCP] is [influencing my retention decision]. I have specific goals that I need to meet, and I get those goals at the beginning of the year from my administration. I'm definitely thinking about how to meet those goals. I want to meet them so that I can ... I have to meet the goals to move up on the pathway. I want to meet them for that. I'm thinking through that as I'm teaching...

Veteran PE teacher Lee has a different take on the goals given her higher salary due to her experience but she was still aware of how the goals set for the pathway might influence her or her PE colleagues. She said,

[TCP placement is] based on meeting your goals, goals set for you. Meeting them can bump you up higher on a pay scale. So if you get master teacher, the different levels, I was intrigued by that but it's not really going to help

me.... I don't know how it's going to affect me yet, this was my placement year so I don't know where I'm placed therefore I don't know...

Each teacher clearly had an opinion on the TCP and for two of the three teachers, the TCP was an extremely important factor in their decision making on whether to remain at Lion College Prep or to leave the school.

### **Commute to work matters to some of the teachers**

Two of the three teachers noted that they considered the commute to the school as one of the factors in their decision on whether or not to stay on with the school. These comments both came out within interviewee responses on the importance of the school principal as previously noted in this chapter. Eve stated that she was living next to a Queen school that she could walk to but she chose to remain with Lion College Prep for a number of factors, in particular the principal. She said,

There are other Queen schools. I actually moved last spring so I'm living right around the corner, walking distance from another Queen school in [the region]. The thought crossed my mind, the commute would be easier, maybe it would make sense for me to go to that Queen school instead. If they had an opening in eighth grade ELA, I could keep my same curriculum and go there.

This statement shows that the commute is not an overpowering factor in her decision but it is something that she considered when she made her decision to stay on.

Similarly, Lee noted that she disliked the commute from her home saying,

...Going home...traffic getting out of here is pretty bad. There's teachers that live in [nearby city one] and [nearby city two], sitting in heavy traffic, same thing for us that live south. [The region] is growing so big...sitting in your car for an hour trying to get home sometimes, after a stressful day, is not a way to spend it.

However, Lee also noted that she was willing to brave the commute given her affinity for Lion College Prep. For both teachers the commute was a factor that did have a

greater influence than others but did not pose a threat to the teachers staying on with the school.

### **A shorter school day made a difference for decision to stay**

One influential central office initiative at the Queen network was the decreasing of the length of the school day. This event caused teachers, two of the three in this study to notice that the central office team was paying attention to their requests, which led them to believe they could continue to teach with the Queen organization. Although this was not an ongoing event- clearly the school day does not decrease in length annually- the initiative still was imbedded in teachers' thinking as evidence that the Queen district was looking to make things more sustainable for teachers over time. Eve and Lee both commented during their interviews on the importance of the decision to change the school day. Eve said,

I think if there's anything that would bring me away from charter schools into a public school, maybe it would be our school year is longer and our school day is longer. It's hard when you know people are making roughly the same salary as you and getting four more weeks of vacation, or giving a couple of hours extra in a day. It meant a lot to me when they shortened the school day. It's not a lot, but I think just the gesture was appreciated. It makes a difference. Getting out at 3:30, versus I think it was 4:15. At the end of the day you really feel that...

Lee said, "Two years ago, they decided to shorten the day.... That was a big one for me. Just that going home that extra 30 minutes and not sitting in that traffic made a world of difference."

One point on the value of the change in the school day as a motivator for teachers to remain is that each of the three teachers interviewed was actually working at the school when the day was longer and is thus more likely to appreciate the shorter day. Given the longer tenure of teachers at Lion College Prep than some other NECMOs as well as the comments of those teachers who were interviewed, it is clear that the benefit of the day

length decision may still be having an impact on teachers' decision-making process. This may not be the case at other NECMOs where a similar decision could have been made but the historical context is lost given the regular churn of the staff.

### **Curriculum production can be a deterrent for teachers**

Eighth grade English teacher Eve made it clear that the curriculum and its state “comes first [as a decision factor to return to the school], because if that’s not in a good place then I know that the year’s just going to be stressful for me.” Despite this factor being only mentioned by one teacher in the study, this is a key learning at Lion College Prep for a number of reasons. One it shows alignment between a teacher’s top factor in returning to the school and the principal’s knowledge that this is a key factor in teachers’ decision making as the principal noted curriculum as a stressor for teachers. Two, this is an area that is certainly within the school’s control. Three, providing a curriculum to teachers, especially teachers new to the profession could have a strong impact on teacher retention, particularly if those teachers had sentiments around leaving or staying similar to Eve. Eve made it clear that she wanted, “things to be easy” and that knowing this would be the case around curriculum that she should plan to return to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade English classroom. (Note that Eve was teaching the same grade and content as she has taught the prior two years, a key component of her decision and ability to utilize the same curriculum) She explained how the knowledge of the existing curriculum and the fact that she would be able to use that curriculum were the top factors in her decision to return to teach at the school:

Being able to come back and be like, “I’ve taught these books twice. This is my third time teaching these books.” I feel like the lessons I made last year were good...It was a really easy decision to [return to teach at Lion]...I’m not going to have to do a ton of revisions on my curriculum. I can walk in and just be kind of focusing on tweaking things and that’s it. It was a pretty easy decision to come back.

Eve also noted that she strongly felt that first year teachers would benefit from having a ready-made curriculum and that this would lead to additional teachers returning to a school district. She described the challenges of curriculum preparation similarly to Jane in the central office saying,

It's a huge load on a new teacher...I wonder if you could just take some of that load off new teachers by really helping them feel like, "No. You can just use this. Don't spend time lesson planning. Just use this. It's good. We've used it.... I know when I was first starting to teach ... so many hours in lesson planning. I wonder if that would be one way to help some teachers feel like they could stay that second year. It's just to be like, "It's there. I'll print out a copy for you. You just make copies. Just use it."

### **Findings On Alignment Between Teacher and Administrator Perceptions of Factors Influencing Teacher Retention Decisions**

Teachers and administrators were aligned on the importance of two of the three central office initiatives that were meant to positively influence teacher retention. The TCP and the financial benefits it brought to teachers was a very important factor within teachers' decision-making process according to teachers and administrators. Both groups were also aligned on the importance that the decision to shorten the school day had on teachers' decision making, and both groups believed that this decision helped teachers to decide to remain with the school.

The administrators and teachers were not aligned on the importance of the district childcare initiative. No teachers noted this as a compelling factor for them in their meaning making to stay on or leave the school. It could be argued that none of the teachers had young children eligible for the program making the initiative less attractive to the interview respondents. This could be true but it should be noted that all interviewees did cite the importance of the program as an example of teacher needs being met by administration- they just didn't think day care was as important as other factors. Teachers and

administrators were also aligned on the need for consistent communication and feedback channels between administrators and teachers, but no teachers pointed to initiatives in this area such as the superintendent listening tour as being a critical factor in their decision to return to Lion College Prep. Some teachers mentioned the specific initiatives that the administrators were very enthusiastic about like being able to have dogs attend school with teachers, but this was not an important factor for teachers' decision to stay on with the school.

What did matter to the teachers was the talent of their school principal, the relationships they held with their students and colleagues and their ability to see academic achievement from their students in pursuit of the school mission. These are factors that the central office leadership seems to be aware of as evidenced by the some of Jane's statements on the importance of the principal's leadership and the value of the strong collegial culture among the adults at the school. That being said, the actual work of building the school culture that teachers and the principal strongly attribute to the 97% teacher retention rate is based on work completed by the school principal at the school, not through specific district initiatives.

## **CONCLUSION**

The teachers interviewed at Lion College Prep in the Queen network were quite different. One was a veteran teacher in her late 40's who had helped to found the school and taught PE. Another was a new mother with two children who was leading curriculum efforts for other eighth grade PE teachers across the Queen regional network after being convinced that her curriculum would not change. The third taught special education and had "looped" with her students for the past three years building strong relationships with them. All three were aware of central office initiatives and cited the TCP as a key influencer

in their decision processes. All three noted that they felt their school principal did a great job and was a key reason- along with their colleagues- that they chose to stay at the school year after year. Each teacher also cited the importance of the relationships that they had built up with students over time and the self efficacy that they developed and the positive feeling that came with that in seeing their students achieve. All teachers also cited the general culture of the campus as being strong along with the principal to whom the teachers ascribed the creation and maintenance of that culture. Overall Lion College Prep in the eyes of the teachers interviewed appears to be a very, very positive school environment for teachers and one where they can stay for their careers. This potential would make it an outlier in the world of NECMOs.

And yet despite the clearly talented school leader and her teacher retention initiatives there still remained a subtle question hanging over two of the three teachers in the group on whether they would return. Lee made it clear that she did not think of leaving the school and couldn't, "imagine doing anything else". However the specter of leaving was still present in the minds of Stacy and Eve. Stacy noted that "you have to be crazy to work here" and referred to the long hours that she put in weekly. Eve noted that she had considered leaving for more pay in other professions and to work elsewhere to shorten her commute. For a campus with as many positives regarding teacher retention as Lion College Prep the fact that stayer teachers with three years of experiences are still weighing options is a sign of the challenge for this and other NECMOs in retaining teachers. That being said I am optimistic that the teachers at Lion will continue to stay on given their focus on the marathon not the sprint.

Eve noted,

...You put in time, you put in sweat, that's definitely how it's feeling a lot of the time. Almost like you want it to pay off, you know, and it doesn't feel



like it pays off if you don't do it multiple years in a row...I feel really good about this school.

Stacy added, "I'm growing into who I am here if that makes sense, and that's a reason for me to stay."

## **Chapter 6: Case Study #3 Taylor Public Schools; Parker Academy**

### **NECMO DESCRIPTION**

On its district website, Taylor does not explicitly use the term “no excuses,” but does note tenants of no excuses schools. For example, it identifies itself as “high performing” with a focus on “providing opportunities for underserved communities” with a mission to “Prepare each student for higher education...”.

The website has a description of the CMO network that reads, “[Taylor Public Schools] are high performing PreK–12 Charter Schools in Texas that focus on science, technology, engineering, and math to provide opportunities for underserved communities” (Taylor Public Schools website).

Although the network does not officially mention college acceptance and completion as a component of the initial above description on its website the CMO’s mission reads as: “Taylor prepares each student for higher education by providing a safe, caring and collaborative atmosphere. Our curriculum features a quality, student-centered educational program with a strong emphasis on science, technology, engineering and mathematics.”

College is an important part of the student experience and culture in the school as evident by the college banners hanging in the hallways of multiple schools, the acceptance letters posted in front offices and the general focus among students and teachers on being accepted to college.

The CMO was founded in Texas and educates 30,000 students across the state. Like the other NECMOs in the study it has won recognition for academic performance including the national distinguished school award by the US Department of Education and for having all of its campuses meet standard per TEA ratings in 2016-2017, while simultaneously

receiving criticism for its model (Heilig, Holme, LeClarir, Redd, Ward, 2016; Fuller, 2014). The network currently operates 54 schools in Texas.

Teacher attrition for Taylor schools in the region is 33.1% as measured in the recent 2016-2017 TEA TAPR report, a percentage that is greater than Eagle's statewide<sup>34</sup> attrition percentage and also greater than Queen's attrition rate in the region. Like other schools and NECMO networks in this study Taylor has teacher retention initiatives focused on salaries and principal training programs. Unlike other networks it has not developed an explicit teacher career pathway strategy for retention of teachers. In fact, Michael, the regional district leader of human capital and human resources noted that at Taylor growth for teachers was primarily available through out of the classroom opportunities. He said, "We don't have any programs where we're trying to really bond a teacher to a classroom, in fact one of our philosophies here is that we don't want to hold back teachers that are capable of doing great things in other areas of the organization."

This philosophy does not align to the district's teacher longevity data. Teachers at the Taylor network in the regional area have at least 2.4 years' experience on average working for Taylor. Despite the lack of time that teachers spend at Taylor in comparison to the state average of 7.2 years, Taylor actually has the highest rate of teacher experience in the study according to district-wide data. See Table 10 for teacher retention data for the network and school.

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<sup>34</sup> TEA releases teacher attrition only for school districts and not by individual schools. Charter schools' teacher attrition data is reported based on all schools covered by a specific charter. Teacher attrition data for the Eagle Network is not available by region as the organization has only one charter which covers the entire state.

Table 10: Taylor Public Schools and & Parker Academy Teacher & Administrator Data

| <u>NECMO</u>                   | <u>Annual<br/>Teacher<br/>Turnover<br/>(%)</u> | <u>Avg.<br/>Years<br/>Teaching<br/>Exp w<br/>school.</u> | <u>Beginning<br/>teachers %</u> | <u>1-5 years<br/>teaching<br/>experience<br/>%</u> | <u>Exp of<br/>principal w<br/>district/<br/>school</u> | <u>Exp of<br/>assistant<br/>principal w<br/>district/<br/>school</u> |
|--------------------------------|--|--|---------------------------------|--|--|--|
| State of Texas                 | 16.5%  | 7.2 years  | 7.8%                            | 28.0%  | 12.2 years   | 10.1 years   |
| Taylor Public Schools (Region) | 44.2%  | 2.4 years  | 13%                             | 64.9%  | 5.3 years  | 4.0 years  |
| Parker Academy                 | N/A  | 3.1 years  | 8.3%                            | 64.9%  | 3.0 years  | 3.3 years  |

*Source: Texas Education Agency 2016-2017 TAPR Report*

## **SCHOOL DESCRIPTION**

The third and final school in the study, Parker Academy serves 950 students in 6th through 12th grades. 56% of the students receive a free or reduced-price lunch, the lowest student poverty data among the three schools in the study. The school is 54% Latino-Hispanic, 10% African-American, 16% White and 15% Asian. These demographics are slightly different than the demographics of other schools in the study, which are more homogenous. The population of white and Asian students is significantly larger than those student populations at other schools in the study. (See Table 11 for demographic data.) 48.6% of students are labeled at risk, a level similar to other schools in the study. The percentage of economically disadvantaged students at Parker is 54%, significantly lower than other schools in the study with low income student populations closer to 90%.

Teachers average 3.1 years of experience at the school, a number which is greater than both the Taylor district average of 2.4 years of experience as well as the average years of average teaching experience at other schools in the study. The teacher retention rate for the school is unavailable per state data but the principal estimated that entering the 2017-2018 school year he retained over 90% of the teachers from the 2016-2017 school year, a rate greater than the regional teacher retention rate of 69%. Like the other schools in the study Parker Academy has received a “Met Standard” rating from the TEA. The school has also received three of the seven academic distinctions for which it was eligible in the past academic year.

Table 11: Taylor Public Schools & Parker Academy Student Demographic Data

| <u>NECMO</u>                   | <u>%<br/>Students<br/>Latino/<br/>Hispanic</u> | <u>%<br/>Students<br/>African<br/>American</u> | <u>%<br/>Students<br/>White</u> | <u>% Student s<br/>Asian</u> | <u>% Students<br/>At Risk</u> | <u>% Student s<br/>Econ Dis</u> |
|--------------------------------|--|--|---------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| State of Texas                 | 52.4%  | 12.6%  | 28.1%                           | 4.2%                         | 50.3%                         | 59.0%                           |
| Taylor Public Schools (Region) | 53.6%  | 11.1%  | 15.3%                           | 17.0%                        | 56.6%                         | 58.1%                           |
| Parker Academy                 | 54.1%  | 9.8%   | 15.1%                           | 16.7%                        | 48.6%                         | 54.0%                           |

*Source: Texas Education Agency 2016-2017 TAPR Report*

Parker has also had a consistent “churn” of principals. Only in the past two years has the school had a constant leader. Two years earlier the school had a sequence of five different principals over a five-year period. This consistent changing in administrative teams was noted in interviews with both administrators and teachers as a significant

challenge towards the creation of a consistent school culture. Both groups felt under the current principals' leadership that culture and teacher retention had improved.

#### **INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS—DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR & SCHOOL PRINCIPAL**

I interviewed two administrators working at the Taylor CMO; a district level administrator responsible for human resources responsibilities across the network that included teacher recruitment and retention, and the school principal at Parker Academy. The district administrator was interviewed at the regional office and the principal was interviewed at the Parker campus.

#### **Michael, school administrator Taylor charter school network, regional director of talent**

Michael is an African-American man in his mid-thirties who serves as the regional director of talent for the Taylor Charter School network. Michael is part of a team of human resources professionals who collaborate across the Taylor CMO's various regions. In his role of regional director of talent he is responsible for the recruitment and hiring of the teachers and administrators within the Taylor network as well as the CMO's teacher retention strategy. He has been working at The Taylor network for one year and prior to that was a human resources leader at the Queen network in another city. He has not worked as an administrator at a traditional public school, nor as a teacher, but is passionate about working at the Taylor network as it provides him a chance to combine his prior work in government and civil service with education. Michael draws a clear connection to the work he does in recruiting and retaining teachers and how that work ultimately leads to student achievement in the classrooms of the Taylor school network.

**Doug, principal, Taylor charter school network; Parker Academy**

Doug is a man in his mid-forties who serves as the principal of Parker Academy within the Taylor Public Schools network. He has previously taught for three years, teaching eighth grade science each year and has also been a principal at a different Taylor network charter school in a different city. The current school year represents his second full year as principal of Parker Academy and his 7<sup>th</sup> year as a principal. Doug greets all of the students as they enter the building each day as he has done since the day he started at Parker Academy. He also tries to greet each of the 65 teachers on the campus as they arrive in the morning or on his observational rounds of classrooms. Doug self reports that the school had a 92% teacher retention rate from August of 2016 to August of 2017 with those teachers returning to teach in the classroom and not moving into administrative roles.

**CMO District Level Teacher Retention Initiatives**

Michael, district director of human resources, is responsible for a wide breadth of work in the Taylor district. His responsibilities range from serving as an advocate and conduit for Taylor with colleges and universities, to leading human resources departments including payroll, benefits, and employee relations to working directly with principals on their employee retention and growth plans. This wide range of responsibilities makes it challenging for Michael to focus deeply on the progress of any one initiative at a specific Taylor campus in the region, a challenge that he articulated multiple times in the interview. However in interviewing Doug, the Parker Academy principal, it became more clear how Taylor district wide teacher retention initiatives were being executed at Parker Academy. Based on information gathered from interviews with both administrators I found that Parker Academy was executing on four specific initiatives which were generated by the central administrative office for the CMO: 1) increased teacher salary due to teacher

attrition, 2) specific stipends aligned to multiple teaching areas-including hard to staff content areas, 3) leadership development trainings with costs of training and travel covered by the school district, and 4) an annual teacher- administrator return to the classroom notification campaign.

### **District retention initiative-salary increase**

The most important strategy for the district and the school was the raising of teacher salaries, an approach that both administrators thought was helpful in improving teacher retention rates at Parker Academy and schools across the network. According to the Parker campus principal, teacher retention at Taylor as a network across the state of Texas has risen from a rate of 30% annual teacher retention to a rate of 70% annual teacher retention over a two-year period following a \$15,000 salary increase for teachers. This change in teacher retention data represents a change of 40% in teacher retention across all schools in the network according to the principal. However, TEA data for the local region during that time period does not show a large increase in teacher retention data, or even an increase at all. Instead of the 40% increase in teacher retention rates the principal described, TEA reports show teacher retention actually declining over the two-year period from 71.3% to 69%. It should be noted that Doug was describing data for all Taylor schools across multiple regions of the state, data that is not publicly available.<sup>35</sup>

The principal's comments on the size of the salary increase also did not align to the data from the TEA TAPR report. The Taylor network's regional schools saw an increase of more than \$6,000 for teachers with one to five years teaching experience. These teachers

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<sup>35</sup> The Taylor NECMO has multiple charters and thus multiple regional TEA TAPR reports showing teacher retention in various regions (but not individual schools) across the state. Just as individual school data is unavailable on teacher retention rates, neither is complete NECMO data across all charters or districts within one NECMO.



make up the core of the local region’s Taylor teachers, but according to TEA data neither this group nor any other component of the teaching staff saw the increase of \$15,000 that the principal cited.

Table 12: Teacher Retention & Salary Taylor Network 2014-2017

|  |          |          |          |
|--|----------|----------|----------|
| Annual Teacher Salary: 1–5 years’ experience       | \$42,688 | \$47,881 | \$48,826 |
| Annual Teacher Retention                           | 71.3%    | 66.9%    | 69%      |
| Average State Teacher Salary 1–5 years’ experience | \$46,575 | \$47,996 | \$48,779 |

One important point on the salary increase at Taylor is that the increase was significant in comparison to where salaries previously were at Taylor, but not in comparison to the state average. Only in 2016-2017 did the average Taylor regional salary for teachers in their first through fifth year exceed the state average. In other words, the salary adjustment may have helped teachers at Taylor choose to remain with the CMO, but it did not vault Taylor into a higher pay range than most other districts in the state.

### **District retention initiative-stipend strategy**

In addition to a salary schedule update, Taylor Public Schools also has a broad number of stipends for teachers. Per Doug, the Parker principal, stipends are focused on STEM (Science-Technology-Engineering- Mathematics) due to a shallower pool of qualified teaching candidates in those subjects, teacher leadership roles, and hard to staff positions. Doug explained that teachers who teach math or science are given an additional \$2,000 annually while English teachers due to recent challenges in staffing this role are

given an additional \$1,000. Teachers teaching CT courses receive an additional \$1500 per each course they teach. In addition to stipends based on the courses teachers teach, Taylor also provides stipends to teachers at schools that are currently labeled Improvement Required by the state or are a state Priority campus, Michael the district leader on this work, did not comment on amounts of these stipends but made it clear that the purpose was to incentivize teachers to transfer to work in schools within the Taylor network that were not performing as well as others. Teachers are also given stipends for leadership roles including content coordination for a region such as 8<sup>th</sup> grade math leader, or for school based content leadership such as middle school science leader for the Parker campus.

#### **District retention initiative- leadership development training**

When asked about any specific actions that he is leading at the district level to improve teacher retention across the region Michael noted that there were two key initiatives that the district is implementing, 1. Taylor Aspiring Leadership Academy (TALA), a cohort-based program focused on expanding leadership and technical skills of educators preparing to take on the assistant principal and principal roles; and, 2. TEAP, an employee education program that provides opportunities for teachers to gain a graduate degree at a nearby university to support their continued education. Both of these initiatives are focused on retaining more teachers and leaders across each of the elementary and middle/ high schools in the region. The TALA program is designed to provide a pipeline of assistant principals and principals for Taylor schools by paying for administrator graduate education programs and certifications so that the organization can hire leaders from within its ranks. District level administrator Michael explained the purpose of TALA saying,

[With TALA], now you have a pipeline of internal leaders. So then you have a list when it's time to hire AP's and principals, there's already a pool of

candidates that are ready to be called and you know that they've been basically developed the Taylor way if you will. They've been through our program, they know what we expect out of our leaders, and that's how that works. Most of them go on and they get their principal certification and things like that...

The TEAP program per Michael is an example of how individuals in the TALA program or who are classroom teachers may also benefit from Taylor's leadership development strategy through gaining additional credentials. Michael noted that this program is open to all staff and there were currently three individuals in the local region that were in the Texas wide program, a teacher, and two administrators who were all enrolled in master's degree programs that were being supported by funding through the TEAP program.

#### **District retention initiative- earlier notification of teacher departure**

In order to combat teacher attrition, central office leaders have developed a new retention initiative focused on communication between teachers and school administrators. The focus is on when teachers notify their manager that they are choosing to leave the school or remain with the school. Teachers receive an additional stipend for clear communication on their employment intentions. Teachers remaining with the district who are able to notify their manager between February and April of their intentions will receive a stipend- \$250 for those who notify leadership that they are leaving following the school year and \$500 for those who note that they are staying for the upcoming year. Principal Doug explained the rationale for the program noting,

Previously we lost lots of teachers in August. They would just [be] sending me an email saying I'm not coming back. And you're not sure until the school starts [which teachers are going to be there]...[This was] not helpful, because by the time you are so late for the hiring, the good teachers [are] already hired by the other districts and everybody. All you're doing, right now, is whoever is going to come; you have to go with it pretty much, because you don't have much choice.

The principal also described the central office led program as a success on his campus noting that he had already had “three to four people” who had already informed in that they were likely going to be telling him in February that they were leaving. He attributed this notification before the actual stipend notification window as evidence that the communication stipend had an effect on teachers’ behaviors since he had not seen similar notifications in the fall of prior years.

#### **INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS—TEACHERS**

I interviewed three teachers at Parker Academy for this study. All of the teachers had taught at the school for at least three years or more, except for one who was beginning her third year of teaching there. All of the teachers also had prior teaching experience before working at Parker Academy. The teachers had attended college both in and out of state and two of the three had received an alternative teaching certification, with the other obtained certification through their undergraduate program. Two of the three teachers were planning on returning to the school for the next year as they have anticipated doing each year they have worked at Taylor Academy. The third teacher was also planning to stay at the school as she had in each of the past three years, but had been questioning her future intentions earlier in the year. None of the interviewed teachers had come through a teaching cohort such as Teach For America or The New Teacher Project.

#### **Libby, Sixth grade English teacher, Taylor charter school network—Parker Academy**

Libby is a married white woman in her early 50s who teaches 6th grade English at Parker Academy, a school within the Taylor CMO network. Libby moved to the region seven years ago and started teaching under an alternative certification as a long term substitute in a nearby traditional public school district. She began teaching at Parker

Academy four years ago. This year marks her third year in a row teaching 6th grade English. Libby took a somewhat non-traditional path to teaching as she worked at a software company for nearly twenty years before entering the teaching profession. Libby believes deeply of being “a constant” in the life of her students, which is why she chooses to teach at a Title I school. Libby serves as the content team leader for middle school English at her school as well as the content team leader for English for the entire region. She has considered leaving the school each year for the past three years at the end of the school year due to a variety of factors including the workload and level of support provided teachers by administration, but has consistently chosen to stay. This year her decision making process continues to fluctuate as prior to her interview she had considered leaving at the end of this year but is now thinking that she will stay on for another year.

**Jenny, Eighth grade science teacher, Taylor charter school network—Parker Academy**

Jenny is a married white woman in her early 40s who teaches 8<sup>th</sup> grade science at Parker Academy. Jenny is also a mother, and has a son who attends an elementary school in the Taylor CMO network. She has taught eighth grade science and only eighth grade science at Parker for the past seven years. Prior to teaching at Parker, Jenny taught fourth grade and then fifth grade for three years total at the large local traditional school district. She did not intend to teach at a CMO but when she looked for a middle school teaching job she was unable to find one at the traditional public school district in the region and opted to apply to smaller districts. The past school year marks the first time Jenny had the same principal for two years in a row. She has worked under six principals in the past seven years at Parker Academy. Given her experience teaching the same content and grade level consistently Jenny has become well versed in her knowledge of the Texas state standards

for eighth grade science and believes that consistently teaching the course has paid off in strong achievement from her students. She is the district leader for 8<sup>th</sup> grade science, coaches the middle school science Olympiad team, and recently led the organization of the recent senior prom as she had a strong bond with that cohort of students when they were in her 8<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. She does not anticipate leaving her teaching position.

**Lacy, Eighth grade math and algebra I teacher, Taylor charter school network—Parker Academy**

Lacy is in her late thirties and is originally from India where she received her undergraduate education. She is married and has two elementary aged children. Lacy is an 8<sup>th</sup> grade math and Algebra 1 teacher at the Parker Academy middle and high school within the Taylor CMO network. This is her third year teaching at Parker, and her fifth overall year of teaching. The 2017-2018 school year is her first year teaching 8<sup>th</sup> grade math, her prior two years at the school she taught 7<sup>th</sup> grade math. Lacy joined the Parker team along with a group of eight other teachers, all of whom-except for one who moved out of state-have remained with the school the past two years. This cohort is important to her and has provided a level of trust and consistency at her grade level and content level weekly meetings. She has not considered leaving the school in the three years that she has worked there and plans to return to her classroom the next school year.

**FINDINGS WITH ALIGNMENT ACROSS ALL TEACHERS**

**Teacher salary and pay**

As noted earlier in comments from the district administrator and school principal the Taylor network's key teacher retention strategy was an adjustment in salary two years prior, which according to him included a \$15,000 raise over the two year period. Principal Doug cited this raise as the key to a *forty percent increase* in teacher retention from 30%

overall to 70% overall- although TEA TAPR report data do not align with either of these descriptions. Despite this lack of alignment on the data, salary was mentioned by all teachers interviewed at the Parker campus as one of their top three considerations when making their own decision to return to the school for the upcoming year. It is important to note that each teacher thought about the importance of salary in their decision making process in a different way given external factors in their lives such as salary of a spouse, but regardless of their situation, salary was clearly an important part of their annual decision making process as to remain with the school or not.

Libby, a sixth grade English teacher, was very clear that salary and the recent pay raises were important to her decision making process. She had consistently considered leaving the school but the pay had been a factor in keeping her on the staff. She described how the Taylor network pay raises in the prior two years had influenced her decision making to stay at Parker Academy saying,

I think our base salary let's just say was like \$40,000 and so they gave us a \$5,000 increase because specifically as I recall, it was for teacher retention. When you start with the area districts, you start at \$45,000. Now if you come here and they tell you you're going to make \$37,000-\$42,000, something like that and you know you can go to a district and start off at \$45,000, well that's a huge deal to folks...It was huge because on top of that, I had the stipend so I literally was making more money than I would at the district.... When I did look for jobs...I realized that I would be taking a bit of a pay cut to go to these other districts...

Eighth grade math teacher Lacy was not as focused on salary as a key part of her decision-making process given the salary her husband contributed to their household as a software engineer. However, she did note that pay was a part of her decision making albeit a smaller one stating, “[Pay], well, it’s kind of important. Teachers, everyone always says they’re underpaid, I’m sure if I went into some kind of industry, I could get paid more but that’s not really the reason I teach. I like working with the kids.”

She went on to add that she had noticed when the pay scale shifted over that past few years and that this did seem to have an impact on her colleagues saying,

Our pay scale is also more competitive with the other ISDs now. When I first started at Taylor, we didn't have a pay scale. You just kind of got paid what they said and you could ask for more, obviously you're not going to ask for less.... [Now] they're competitive with other districts.

Similarly to Lacy, 8<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher Jenny believed in the importance of the salary at Parker as a factor in teachers' retention decision making process, although the pay was not the top factor for her, she knew that it was for many of her colleagues saying,

I know a lot of teachers who are the primary breadwinners. I'm not the primary; my husband helps a lot, so for me it's not as important as for the others. I know a lot of teachers who would like to get a better pay, who just had a kid. I think pay is a very important factor for them to stick around.

In regards to her own decision-making process, Jenny actually thought that her salary was lower than the salary of teachers working at the nearby traditional school district. This sentiment, although different than that of the other interviewees, still did not change her perspective that she wanted to stay at the school. She said,

Yeah, I have looked at the salary. It's a little higher in public schools. So I always think, "Do I want to trade the structure over here compared to the structure in public schools for that money? Most of the times I say, "No, I think I want that peace of mind."

The peace of mind and structure that Jenny described could be attributed to multiple factors in her day to day work, most specifically the consistent level of support she received from administration and the relationship she had with her colleagues. Both of these factors were mentioned by each of the others teachers interviewed at the school.

### **School administration & manager matter for teacher stayers**

In their own way each of the teachers interviewed at Parker Academy noted that the level of support that they received from their principal and other members of the



administrative team was a key factor in their decision to remain at the school. For two of the teachers the administration was a positive factor that spurred them to come back to the school, particularly over the past two years since Principal Doug had joined and remained on. For one teacher the administration was a point of contention for her each year, but had recently become a begrudgingly appreciated point of her work. All of the teachers used the term “support” as an important component of their decision to remain teaching at the school, although they defined support in slightly varied ways. 8th grade science teacher Lacy noted that of all the factors influencing her decision to stay at the school the quality of the support she received from the administration was critical and that the change in leadership two years ago was challenging. She said,

The most important [factor in my decision to stay at the school] was good administration. The year before [last] the administration changed so we were all worried about how that administration was going to look like. Everybody changed, assistant principal, the principal, principal of high school, everybody changed, so that was little worrying for me... [We had a] true administration last year, I got a true one...

Lacy went on to note that with the change in leadership two years ago that she felt that the new administrative team was doing a good job in providing her what she needed as a teacher and this led her to want to remain with the school for the foreseeable future assuming the leadership did not change. She stated,

Our assistant principal is there for us; I feel that somebody is there for us...I know whom to go to for what, so if I have a disciplinary issues, I know whom to go to. If I have to call a parent, and I do not speak Spanish, or I do not speak Arabic, I know whom to go to. I know the chain of command. So I feel as if I'm more comfortable here, again...This is a very good place to settle...that is provided the administration doesn't change, keep changing its mind about things. It's a very good place for me, at least, from my point of view. To settle down and have your own class and be...especially with the family. I think this is a good place....

Jenny also stated that the support she received from the administration was the top factor in her decision to remain with the school. She noted that the administrators at Parker Academy worked differently than those at the local school district where she had previously taught and that she appreciated the difference explaining that classroom observations were less rigid and impersonal. She said,

When I was in [another district], we seemed very micromanaged. People from the head office would come to observe us like groups of five, six administrators, all dressed up in their suits and stuff like that and it was kind of ... It just didn't make a very good environment...They wanted to see everyone teaching the same thing at the same time, but that's impossible 'cause your classes are all different...Our admin are pretty fair, they're approachable. I know what to expect from them and it's good.

Sixth grade English teacher Libby had a different take on the administration. She recognized the principal and the administrative team as being a key part of her own decision making to stay at the school. However, for her salary was more of a factor in than the competence and level of support she received from the administration. She felt that in prior year years the principal and other administrators had had “absolutely no idea of the challenges that teachers faced” and had yearned for additional support. She stayed on at the school due to the higher salary she was making in comparison to other districts and in the hope that things would improve with the leadership team. This year when reflecting on her decision to come back to the school for the 2017-2018 year she said, “Well, I guess I'd have to say the devil you know is better than the devil you don't know. I had three years under my belt, I pretty much know everyone, I know administration...”

Libby also noted that for her the core reason she chose to stay was her “pals” or colleagues on the sixth-grade team. The importance of competent and supportive colleagues was consistent across all teacher interviews as a reason for remaining on at Parker Academy.

### **Teacher colleague relationships influence teacher stayer decision making**

A huge factor [in my decision to stay] was, I have to say, is that three new teachers that came on last year became my pals basically. The way that came about is that I saw them hired typical Taylor style, just before school and I didn't want them to drown like I had because I was hired fairly closely to the beginning of school. I maybe had more like a week or so. They only had a day, couple of days. I would check in with them and I'd be like, "Hey, what do you need? I can help you with this." We bonded over this experience and I got to know these folks...I actually said to my colleagues, "I'm going to move on." They're like "No." I was thinking, are you kidding me? It's just a job. They're like, "No, we need you here." So kind of that emotional tie...(Libby 6<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher).

This quote is a good example of the power of colleagues in both influencing a teacher's decision to leave a school in the moment and also in the power of the relationships between teachers that can be built for the long haul. When the conversations that Libby referenced from last year took place, they were building on a year of trust and confidence that had been built up over the course of a school year. This is important as in some schools, teachers can be more territorial and less apt to provide resources or emotional support to one another. For example, Lacy noted that all six teachers on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade team stayed on at the school for the past two years. She described this continuity and the cooperation she receives from other teachers as important to keeping her at the school saying,

We were all here last year. And the year before that.... I think there's a good bonding between the teachers and the administration. I don't know. I feel that's...I want to stick around because I like the way I'm being treated here. The cooperation that we get from other teachers [matters]...Every day I meet all my math teachers, 6th, 7th, and 8th. There's a 7th grade teacher. He comes to my room everyday. We just discuss our problems, because his students are my students now, so I keep telling him, "Oh this kid. Do you remember what happened? How did you deal with that?" So it's really...I don't know...I like the way we communicate and it's very respectful. [There is] no competition between teachers...whenever we get any materials that we used and we liked, I like to share it, because I get the same from them. So when they make a copy, they always make an extra copy...If I was in a place where I was by myself, I would have left long ago. So the community and that's being nurtured here is really good.

Eighth-grade science teacher Jenny also notes that the relationships with her colleagues are an important part of her experience teaching at Parker Academy saying, “It was just nice to know that I had teacher support from other teachers as well as the admins, as well.” Clearly the value of colleague relationships cannot be understated at Parker. All teachers interviewed value this and based on her comments Libby would have likely left the school last year if not for her peers. Interestingly most of the teacher stayers interviewed not only mentioned their colleagues as important to their decision making, but also their leadership roles on the campus. In other words, the informal bonds between colleagues matter, but so do the formal leadership titles and the means of supporting colleagues across the school and network through curriculum creation or grade level leadership.

### **Campus leadership opportunities are important to teacher stayers**

Although the teacher stayers at the Parker campus are undoubtedly busy in their own classrooms they had each been asked by the administration to lead in various capacities. Some of these roles came with additional pay stipends others did not. What was clear in speaking with each teacher was that whether they chose to accept the role or not, what was important was that they were given the opportunity to do so, an option that was often lacking at other schools where they had worked. Sixth grade English teacher Libby articulated the importance of the chance to lead at the school and was visibly proud of her work. She said,

Taylor is a conundrum. There are some really terrible things; there are some really good things. I will say on the positive side, one of the reasons I stay is that I have been not only offered but actually given an opportunity to engage in the leadership opportunities. I would never have gotten those in a regular district. But the fact is, to be Professional Learning Committee [leader], I was actually appointed, I was asked. It was like, we want you to do this and I was like, okay. Then department chair was based on the fact that also in addition to PLC leader, I was a mentor teacher. I had worked with other teachers...

Eighth-grade science teacher Jenny was also involved in a number of leadership roles including science team leader for the school and for the regional network. In addition to this curriculum leadership work she also leads science Olympiad, and national junior honor society and even was co-teacher leader on the high school prom. In other words, her commitments to the adults and students in the building are considerable. When I asked Jenny why these leadership roles were important and how they influenced her decision making she smiled and noted that she planned to come back next year as she had in each of the past seven years and that for her it was about “the return on the work that she has seen” noting that it was great to see her former 8<sup>th</sup> grade scientist students at the prom and to help her colleagues better prepare for their STAAR exams across the district. For Jenny teaching at Parker seemed to mean more than teaching in her classroom it meant teaching adults in the building and students who were no longer in her grade level. The engagement with both of these groups of people contributed to her overall satisfaction and desire to remain with the Taylor school network.

Eighth-grade math teacher Lacy had elected not to take on a leadership role in math in part due to the schedule of her younger children. She noted that she didn’t, “do as much as other teachers do. I don’t have as much as they do. I’m just inspired by all these teachers who do so much.” She very much valued the leadership of her peers on her team and appreciates the fact that at the Parker school she can be given a chance to lead within a, strong community of teachers.

### **Consistency of grade level and subject important to teacher stayers**

Two of the teacher stayers at the Parker campus had all taught the same grade level and same content area for at least three years. Libby noted that after one year of teaching 9th grade English in her first year that she was very please to go back to “The Middle” as

she called 6th grade English as this was “her kind of students”. For Libby it was important to her that she was teaching students at an age level that she wanted to teach in the content area that she was most confident and comfortable with. Jenny has taught 8th grade science for seven years in a row since the school had opened and had trouble even conceiving what it might look like to teach a different grade and subject area. Lacy made it clear that her ideal was to teach the same content to the same grade level each year. Of the three teachers interviewed at the school she was the only teacher who had not had this experience over time, teaching 7th grade math and working as an interventionist in her first year, 7th grade math alone in her second year and 8th grade math and Algebra I this year. Lacy noted the challenges of the changes saying,

I wanted to continue the 7th grade, because I was getting good at it. I felt like that age group was, I don’t know, I could relate to them very well. Because once they get into 8th grade they are like relaxed and they feel as if they’ve achieved something.... So for me, if I don’t have to change anything I would rather not...I would like...if I’m good at it, I like to stick with it, and slowly add in changes. Not, you know, all of a sudden [8th grade]. Boom, there you go, so many changes.

Although the premise of teaching the same grade level and content area each year seems straight forward for Lacy it was not an expectation from her time working at Parker. It did not seem like a change in the future would be as much as a deterrent to her return to the school as it might for Jenny or Libby—Lacy had noted that she planned to return for the upcoming year—but it would certainly not inspire her nor generate confidence in the decision-making ability of the administration to be switched to a different subject or grade level.

### **Commute matters to teacher stayers**

One of the findings that came up in the teacher interviews at Parker Academy was the influence of the teachers’ commute to work on their staying with the school. Each

teacher mentioned the commute to varying degrees in their comments, some more so than others. Libby noted the commute among the varied reasons she considered on the positive side of her decision-making ledger saying, “It’s a fairly easy drive”. Jenny noted that the school is “close to my house, it’s like not even 10 minutes if I hit the green light coming across the [highway].” Lacy explained that, when she was considering leaving the school at one point, that the commute was a key part of her decision saying,

I thought of moving to a school closer to my house. My kids walk to school, so there’s a middle school and an elementary school [nearby that they could go to]. So I’ve thought about that, but never come to get my resume ready and send it or anything like that. I’ve never done that. Just for the reason that the traffic is very bad on [the highway].... That commute it’s a frustrating one. It’s not the deal breaker, but it makes you think. I think that would be [a key factor for leaving].

Given the urban environment of the Parker campus and the high levels of traffic near the school it is interesting to consider how this factor as opposed to factors within the school building such as leadership or curriculum were a cognizant and unprompted part of each teachers responses on factors that influence their stay or leave decision making.

## **FINDINGS WITH ALIGNMENT ACROSS SOME TEACHERS**

### **Teacher- Student Relationships & Achievement**

Two of the three teachers in the study noted the importance of the long-term student relationships that they had built over their time teaching at Parker Academy. For Jenny the relationships with the student alumni from her 8<sup>th</sup> grade science classroom represented a large part of her impetus to remain at the campus. She said that after support from the administration the students and the relationships she had built with them over time were the most important factor encouraging her to stay at the school each year. Clearly given the current seniors interest in having her as their prom co-chair and her ongoing coaching of

high school students on science Olympiad she remained an integral figure in the lives of both her current and prior students, something she took great satisfaction from. Lacy also noted that her students were the second most important factor for her decision making after support from the administration. She also specifically noted that it was important that her students were performing at a high level and proudly cited the fact that 89% of her students passed the 7<sup>th</sup> grade state math exam the previous year.

**Parent support is different at a CMO school and that matters to some teacher stayers**

Jenny noted that in teaching in the Taylor Public Schools network that she saw a different level of parent engagement with the school than at traditional school districts where she worked. She said,

It's a conscious decision for the parents to send their kids here, they could just tell them to go their neighborhood school, most of them can walk or take a bus. Here, the only busing we do is from two other Taylor campuses. So, it's a conscious decision, so I find that I do get more support from parents... I make a conscious decision to send my son to a Taylor school, as well, instead of our public school.... I get more parent support, I find....Some of the kids really, really want to be here, some of the kids hate it.

Jenny's statement although unique among the responses of the teachers interviewed is important because it matches a common critique of charter schools and NECMO's that their students perform at high levels because they receive additional help at home from parents who are more engaged in their education. Jenny noted that increased parent engagement was a reason she stayed on at Parker, but was not one of her top three reasons for doing so.



## **FINDINGS ON DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHER RETENTION; TEACHERS VS. ADMINISTRATORS**

After reviewing comments from teachers and administrators at the Parker Academy campus two differing points of view between the teachers and the administrators on teacher retention emerged. The first difference was on how to incentivize teachers to remain in the classroom through programming and professional development opportunities. The second gap in understanding involved how teachers communicated their intentions to remain or depart the school team.

### **Teacher professional development misalignment**

District human resources and teacher retention leader Michael believes that the Taylor network is running a very compelling teacher professional development program based on the TEAP program which provides Taylor teachers or leaders additional professional degrees and the TALA program which provides teachers with a path into Taylor administration. He describes these at programs that give teachers the means to grow and in doing so explicitly and implicitly states that growth involves a departure from the classroom. He says,

We don't have any programs where we're trying to really bond a teacher to a classroom, in fact one of our philosophies here is that we don't want to hold back teachers that are capable of doing great things in other areas of the organization... I think it's real tempting and easy to do if you have somebody that's killing it every year and growth scores are off the chart with the STAAR and things like that. It's really easy to [try to keep teachers in the classroom]...Like nobody comes in the door and just says I want to teach fifth grade my whole life, like and I don't care if I'm the same person when I leave as I was when I came in the door. That's not most people's mentality, 99 percent of people don't look at things like that... So to be honest with you I don't think we really want people that come through the door and they don't want to do anything outside of being the person that they were when they walked in the door.

These statements differ from teacher stayer Jenny's mindset who want to keep on teaching 8th grade science in her classroom as she has the past seven years. She notes that she has no interest in administrative work:

I'm not too sure about the administrative path because I'm not really interested in that. We have several teachers that are going to school to get their master's for administration because they want to become administrators. But, I'm not really too sure about that....at this point I don't think I'd want to do that. Because most of the admin positions, you're dealing more with either numbers or how the kids are doing or parents.

Fellow 8th grade teacher Lacy goes a step farther noting that she is interested in a program that helps her in her work in the classroom saying,

I wish they did some more professional development programs that was actually useful, involving teacher growth. I feel as if the professional development is not great here. I hear about P.D.s from my teachers in public schools and there's a lot of great things going on... I hear that in public schools the recognition is higher. I know. I have a friend who got recognized for her teaching and writing and things like that...

This gap between the district leader's understanding of what teachers or in his estimation "99% of teachers" are interested in regarding professional training and the teacher stayers within shows that what teachers are looking for in their professional development may not be what is being provided by the district's leadership.

### **Organization communication gaps**

The Parker Academy School principal noted that one of the more important programs involving teacher retention at the school was the early notification stipend strategy where teacher would report their intention to remain or leave the campus in a timeline fashion between February and April and in return receive a stipend. Principal Doug believed that this program was very helpful in his knowledge of the staff's intentions for the upcoming school year. However, in speaking with teachers about their timeline for communicating with the school none of the teachers mentioned the stipend program nor

seemed to have knowledge of the timeline for their communication. Eighth grade teacher Lacy noted that she heard of her grade and content level teaching assignment on the last day of school which was when she was then able to make her decision-making process in earnest. Sixth grade ELA teacher Libby said that she said,

I want to say May [is when I would decide if I return] but honestly, I know districts basically will put jobs out, they take people in house first and whatever shakes out, around about July, is what they offer to the public. If I were to make a decision, it'd probably be sometime in July.

Clearly there is a gap on what teachers are understanding for their decision-making timeline and what administrators are presenting.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The findings from the interviews at Parker Academy were divided into three sections: the first section was focused on common themes that emerged across interviews with all three Parker teachers. In the second section I focused on themes that emerged for some but not all of the Parker teachers. And in the third section I noted some of the key differences that emerged on the topic of teacher retention between the perspectives of teachers and the school principal and district administrator. Findings that were common across all teachers' decision making to remain with the school included the importance of teacher salary and pay, the need for consistent administrator and support from leadership at the campus, and the importance of trustworthy and dependable colleagues on their grade level team. Two other interesting findings that were mentioned by all three teachers were the importance of a short commute to their school and being able to consistently teach the same grade level and subject each year.

Findings that were consistent with some, but not all of the teachers' decision making on staying at the Parker campus included teacher student relationships, student

academic performance, and the higher level of parent engagement at the school as compared to other schools where the teachers had worked.

There were two key findings highlighting a gap in understanding between teachers and administrators. The first was a gap in professional development programming interests from teachers and what the administration was actually providing. The second was the understanding of the district's explicit communications around teacher retention; the administrators believed that the program to have teachers inform them of their potential departure and the providing of stipends to do so was working. The teachers had not heard of such a program and were therefore not considering it in their decision making on returning to the school.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The interviews with teachers and administrators at Parker Academy illuminated many trends that were consistent at the other schools in the study as well as in the research literature on NECMOs and teacher retention. School leadership matters to teachers when they consider leaving a school. Strong professional and caring colleague matter to teachers in their decision-making process, as does salary and stipends for pay.

However, the greatest conclusions I am drawing from the interviews at Parker Academy are what did the teachers not say. The teachers did not focus on their school's mission or a pride in seeing students attend college as they did at the other NECMOs in the study. This is behavior that would likely seem odd in other NECMOs where the intentionality of closing the achievement gap between students from low income backgrounds and their more affluent peers is not only part of the mission but is literally posted on the walls of the school and is a constant in the dialogue of staff and in the daily decision making processes of administrators and teachers alike. In my own experience as

a former NECMO principal it is quite challenging not to consider the obstacles that students from low income backgrounds faced on a daily basis when thinking about the general work of teaching and leading in the school. And yet throughout the interviews at Taylor there were very few comments on overcoming the challenges of poverty. This was despite the fact that more than half the student received a free or reduced price lunch. In addition to the lack of a focus on the challenges that students brought with them, teacher and administrator discussions were for the most part devoid of a focus on student achievement, another hallmark of NECMO culture. Except for one teacher who noted her state test scores, there was very little discussion on student achievement data, or like in many NECMOs, how students' academic performance was aligning with the school's mission of college acceptance. One possible reason for the lack of this discussion could be a culture established by the school leadership that was not student growth centered, but rather accepting of the students as they arrived with smaller expectations for change. This cultural difference stands out in comparison to the staff at other NECMO's belief in their ability to impact student performance regardless of student background or poverty.

This culture and mindset was evident in the principal Doug's implicit comments in describing the student body at his school and at other schools in the Taylor network. He does not attribute the success of the school directly to the type of students and their background, but he makes it clear that the student's background is a reason for the success. This is the opposite view of other NECMOs where principals often note that their students are succeeding in spite of their impoverished backgrounds.

The campus that I had worked with...almost 70/80% is economically disadvantaged. There's lots of discipline issues. The teachers get worn out quickly, and those are the campuses that actually lose the teachers. So the campus culture is important, like this campus, even though we have a high 50% economically disadvantaged kids. Everybody here [students] are more

respectful and also more responsive to the teachers, and are [more] academically successful.

In other words, what it appears principal Doug is saying is that the behavior of the students is directly correlated to both the percentage of low income students at the school as well as the existing campus culture. He also infers that the teacher retention rate is high due to the culture of the school that he in part attributes to the lower percentage of students from low-income backgrounds at least in comparison to his prior placement.

## Chapter 7: Discussion

NECMOs are schools that are part of large 501c3 non-profit charter management organizations focused on college acceptance for their students. Charter schools including NECMOs are growing across the country. Recent data from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools shows that 300 new charter schools opened in the fall of 2016 bringing the total number of students enrolled in a charter school to 3.1 million nationwide<sup>36</sup>. Within this growth NECMO growth has also increased over this time period with NECMOs growing at twice the rate of traditional charter schools (25% to 12%) (Mead, LiBetti, Mitchel, & Rotherham, 2015).

As noted in chapter one, charter schools, and in particular NECMO schools also serve a large number of minority students and students from low income backgrounds. These schools also suffer from low rates of teacher retention. Teacher retention matters to students in these schools because research has shown that with increased teacher retention schools benefit from greater stability leading to academic gains for students over time (Barnett & Hudgens, 2014; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013).

Prior researchers have connected low rates of teacher retention across traditional public schools to a variety of factors ranging from “pull factors” that draw teachers from the field including a lack of experience in the role (Ingersoll, 2001), to an interest in greater salary opportunities elsewhere (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Shin, 1995), as well as “push factors” such as poor working conditions (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2011), a lack of leadership (Louis & Dretzke, 2010; Coelli & Green, 2012), and poor school culture (Simon & Moore-Johnson, 2013). Research specific to charters and to NEMCOs has more narrowly shown many of these same issues affect teacher retention, but that there are

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.publiccharters.org/about-charter-schools>

additional factors, - i.e. additional challenges of long hours (Torres, 2016), and high accountability and expectations for performance (Lack, 2009).

There has been little research however on those NECMO teachers who have elected to stay in their role and continue to do so. At NECMOs, where teacher retention has historically remained lower than at traditional charter schools, and significantly lower than traditional public schools (See Chapter 1), understanding why teachers stay is important. Building an understanding of teacher stayers' perspective on their school environment and ultimately their decision making processes is important because their insights may include information that can decrease teacher turnover since they have overcome factors that may have driven other teachers away from their schools (Sell, 2013). Research has shown that some teacher stayers have remained in their role due to their specific school context, (Henninger, 2007) or a belief in school leadership (Berry, Fuller, & Williams, 2007). Additional research has shown that teacher stayers are more likely to remain in their schools when those schools are performing well academically (Loeb, Kalogrides, & Béteille, 2012). Given that the teachers themselves are one of the core reasons schools experience academic success (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005), the retention of teacher stayers in their roles is critical for consistent student achievement, particularly in schools serving students from predominantly low income backgrounds (Quartz, Thomas, Anderson, Masyn, & Lyons 2008).

This study has sought to address the gap in the stayer literature by determining *how* NECMO teacher “stayers” make meaning of their decisions to stay in their teaching positions, and what specific factors, including potential district based teacher retention initiatives are a part of this meaning making process.

I addressed this gap in the research by interviewing teacher “stayers, defined as teachers that remained at their current school for at least three years, at schools in three



different NECMO ‘networks’ in a one Texas urban area. I selected three different NEMCO networks because I wanted to study networks with different types of retention contexts and initiatives. To understand the retention policies and the context at each school, I interviewed a district administrator, and the school principal at each school: Angel College Prep in the Eagle NECMO network, Lion College Prep in the Queen NECMO network and Parker Academy in the Taylor Network. I then interviewed three “teacher stayers” at each school site (total n=15). Based on these 15 interviews, using the administrator’s remarks as context, but focusing specifically on the teacher’s responses, I wrote a case study analysis of each school site as described in the previous three chapters. Within each case study I determined patterns in teachers responses and also compared teachers’ perspectives to those of the school’s central office administrator and principal often finding a gap in understanding on how teachers were constructing their decision to remain at the school between the two groups. Each of the teachers in each case study stated explicit factors that were most important in their own meaning making and all teachers were able to articulate why those factors were so important to their unique teaching situation and view of themselves as a teacher.

In this chapter I will conduct a cross case analysis of each of the three case studies in order to answer each of the two research questions posed in this study. The research questions are: *1. How do teachers make meaning of their decisions to stay in their teaching position at NECMO charter schools? And 2. How do teachers make sense of district level NECMO retention initiatives in their decision to stay teaching at their school?*

I will answer the research questions in two parts, first by describing patterns in the nine teachers’ meaning making across all three sites in regards to research question one. I will then focus on research question two by analyzing teacher meaning making on specific district-based teacher retention initiatives. Following this analysis I will then review

connections between the patterns in the teachers' responses and the research literature on teacher retention at TPSs and NECMOs. Finally, I will complete the chapter with recommendations for future research on this topic and policy recommendations for policy makers and practitioners at both NECMOs and traditional public schools.

### **SUMMARY OF CROSS CASE ANALYSIS FINDINGS**

I analyzed patterns in teachers' responses in two ways. First, I reviewed what themes they mentioned in their interviews as having an impact on their meaning making process when deciding to return to their teaching role or to leave. Second, I reviewed data from each teacher's interview in response to an explicit question on the top factors that influenced each teacher's decision to remain or leave their teaching role.

There were nineteen themes that were mentioned during interviews by at least two teachers across the three case studies. Given the small number of teachers in the study and the broad number of themes I honed in on, I focused on those themes that were noted by at least six of the nine teachers in the study and by at least one teacher at each case study school. There were seven of these themes, which are listed in Table 13, with the respective number of teachers noting each theme as a part of their meaning making process in parenthesis: 1. Teacher peer relationships (9/9), 2. Principal effectiveness and culture building capacity (7/9), 3. Relationship with teacher manager (7/9), 4. Student relationships over time (8/9), 5. Student Academic performance (7/9), 6. The ability to lead and support teacher colleagues (6/9), 7. Commute to school (6/9).

Table 13: Teacher Meaning Making To Themes (n=9)

| Theme   | Teachers Noting Theme in Interview | # of Schools where Theme Mentioned |
|---|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Teacher peer relationships                            | 9/9                                | 3/3                                |
| Student relationships over time                       | 8/9                                | 3/3                                |
| Principal effectiveness and culture building capacity | 7/9                                | 3/3                                |
| Relationship with teacher manager                     | 7/9                                | 3/3                                |
| Student Academic performance                          | 7/9                                | 3/3                                |
| The ability to lead and support teacher colleagues    | 6/9                                | 2/3                                |
| Commute to school                                     | 6/9                                | 3/3                                |

An additional key conclusion from this study is that teachers at NECMO schools are constantly weighing small or large bits of information as to whether they should stay on in their role or not. With the exception of Lee who had taught physical education for 24 years and stated she wasn't going anywhere, all of the teachers interviewed noted that they had at times considered leaving or even looked for other jobs in previous years but had decided to stay put. And these are the teachers who have stayed! In other words even though these teachers had all stayed in their roles for at least three years at a minimum and even though they all stated that they were returning for the upcoming 2018-2019 school year, the durability of their decision to stay was not solid and was contingent on ongoing blunt or subtle events in their teaching experience.

#### **CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS—ALL NETWORKS—SCHOOL-BASED FACTORS**

The first research question in this study is: *How do teachers make meaning of their decisions to stay in their teaching position at NECMO charter schools?* The following analysis will answer this question based on data derived from the core meaning making

themes described by each of the nine teachers, including teacher responses to the specific question, “what were the top factors that influenced your decision to stay or leave your teaching role?”

### **Teacher peer relationships**

All nine teachers in the study described their peer relationships as one of the most important factors when they considered whether to remain at their school for another year of teaching. This was the only theme that had universal agreement from all teachers in the study and was also the only theme that multiple teachers included in their top three decision making factors, with five teachers describing their peer relationships as one of their top three factors and two of the teachers stating it was the most important factor in their decision-making process.

Teachers described their peers and the influence of their peers in varied ways. For example, some teachers described other teachers on their team as their “pals” or their “partners” while for other teachers their peers were simply, “their team” and for many they were “their friends” or “some of my best friends”(see Chapters 4, 6). Generally when teachers were describing their peers, they were referring to teachers with whom they worked on a daily basis. Usually these were teachers on their grade level team: for instance, if a teacher taught 8<sup>th</sup> grade English, these would be the other eighth grade teachers, e.g. math, science, history, etc. The rationale for peers as being a part of a teacher’s decision was straightforward, these were people whom the interviewed teachers got along very well with and with whom they had valued friendships that extended beyond the realm of a straightforward relationship between professional colleagues.

For example, when teachers at each school discussed their relationships with their colleagues, they described activities that took place outside of school and outside of

traditional working hours. At Lion College Prep they described spending time together at happy hour (Chapter 5) and at Angel college prep they spent time at one another's homes on the weekends (Chapter 4). When teachers described their relationships within school time they noted cooperation and a lack of competition at Parker (Chapter 6), at Lion colleagues described cooperation and appreciation among the teachers (Chapter 5), and at Angel teachers believed colleagues were supportive and caring (Chapter 4). These interactions combined with the student and parent challenges that teachers faced together as a team (Chapter 6) created a foundation of professional trust that teachers deeply valued. They "wanted to be around" (Chapter 5) one another and wanted to have that trust continue for them year after year (Chapters 4, 5, 6). This trust and confidence in peers was a large reason that teachers wanted to stay. The importance of these relationships on teacher meaning making is worth considering and will be discussed further in the policy implications section.

### **Principals' culture building and administrative support**

Teachers mentioned the importance of the school principal's ability to build a strong school culture, and consistency in implementing discipline and operating procedures. Across all three case study schools there were five teachers who placed the principal as one of the top three most important factors in their decision to return to teach each year, with two of those five teachers describing the principal as the most important factor in their decision. Seven of the nine teachers explicitly noted the importance of the principal created culture as well as the support they received from members of the school's administrative team on their decision making. All three teachers from Lion College Prep specifically cited the importance of the principal and teachers from Parker Academy and Angel College Prep also described the importance of the administration.

This theme was particularly prevalent at Lion College Preparatory in the Queen network where all three teachers explicitly cited the importance and value they placed on their school principal when considering whether to return to the school. Similarly at Parker Academy in the Taylor network, all three teachers interviewed cited the importance of the stability that the principal had brought to campus procedures such as reporting structures as well as the disciplinary support that he and the administrative team provided to teachers. These teachers all referred to this consistency as central to their decision making process to remain with the school. At Eagle where the staff had experienced four principals in five years, two of the three teachers at the Eagle network did not directly discuss the school's principal as a deciding factor for them, but rather their direct manager who was usually an assistant principal whom they referred to as their manager.

### **The role of teachers' managers**

Seven of the nine teachers interviewed cited their direct manager as a key component in their decision-making process with all three teachers at Angel College Prep in the Eagle network and all three teachers at Parker Academy in the Taylor network citing teacher managers as an important part in their decision-making process. Direct managers were assistant principals, deans or other administrative leaders who directly supervised teachers in the study. (None of the teachers in the study directly reported to the principal.) These managers were important to the teacher stayers because teachers said they felt they helped teachers to improve their instruction while also providing ongoing praise (Chapter 4, Angel College Prep) and were approachable and consistent on discipline support (Chapter 6, Parker Academy). Teachers at Angel College Prep also described the importance of their belief in their manager's integrity stating that they "cared about people" (Gabriele, Chapter 4) and Parker Academy teachers stated that it was the accessibility of

their manager that was extremely important to them knowing that their manager “is there for us” (Lacy, Chapter 6).

Managers also were an important theme for teacher stayer meaning making, because knowing who one’s manager would be in a future year figured into teachers’ decision to remain with their school or to leave. Teacher stayers at most schools wanted to know who their managers would be in advance of their decision. For example, at Angel College Prep and at Parker Academy it was clear that the previous churn of principals at each school had made teachers wary of whom their future manager might be, as prior principals had shuffled the management of teaching teams. Teachers from both of these schools placed a high premium on having knowledge of exactly who would be supervising them in the upcoming school year as a part of this decision. For example, one teacher stated that she would not have returned for the current school year if she were not able to work with her same manager (Chapter 4).

Three teachers in the study cited the knowledge of having a strong manager in the upcoming year as being one of their top three decision making factors, two of those teachers taught at Angel College Prep, the other at Parker Academy. Two of the three teachers at Lion College Prep in the Queen network did not discuss their direct manager as an important part of this process. This was likely due to their overt focus on their school principal as the key leader influencing their decision to remain teaching in their classroom.

Most teachers said that in the past their decisions to stay had been influenced by their knowledge of who their teacher manager would be. Ironically, when I asked teachers if they knew who their manager might be for the upcoming 2018-2019 school year, most of the teachers across each school were unclear on exactly who that person would be. They assumed that they would have the same person but knew that it was possible given previous history at their respective campuses for their manager to be reassigned to another grade

level or content area or to also leave the network. This uncertainty is an area that could likely be improved with clear planning and is mentioned in the policy recommendations section.

### **Strong student relationships**

Eight of the nine teachers interviewed cited their feeling of a strong relationship with their students as one of the key factors in their decision-making process on whether to return to teach each year. All three teachers interviewed at Angel College Prep cited the relationships that they felt they had built with students as their *most* important factor when considering whether or not to return, two of the three teachers at Lion College Prep also ranked student relationships as their most important and second most important decision-making factor respectively. The one teacher who did not cite this as a key part of their decision-making taught at Parker Academy.

After conducting interviews with each teacher it was clear that the teachers believed they had deep bonds with their students. Not only with their current students, but also those who had been in their classrooms in prior years and would come back to see them repeatedly. For example teachers at Angel College Prep described the importance of their relationships with former students saying, “I have a vested interest in seeing where their growth is going’ (Steve, Chapter 4), and also how their former students were depending on them to stay with them through graduation and the teachers in turn felt obligated to do so (Mary, Gabrielle, Chapter 4). At Lion College Prep teachers described how important it was that they got to see former students’ growth over time (Stacy, Lee, Chapter 5). The importance of long term student relationships was also evident in the formal roles teachers like Lacy took at Parker Academy where she led the prom committee as well as science Olympiad, and in informal roles like the one held by Gabrielle at Angel College Prep who



held strong relationships with Latina students who identified with her as a Latina leader and came back to visit her classroom often.

One reason why these long term relationships may have been so important to the NECMO teacher stayers might have been their proximity to their former students. Each of the NECMO campuses in the study housed a 6–12<sup>th</sup> grade campus. This meant that unlike most middle schools where students depart the physical building at the end of eighth grade, at the NECMO campuses the students remained physically nearby. Three teachers in the study (one from each school) noted how they enjoyed engaging with former students while at school, how often all of the teachers engaged with former students during the day was unclear.

One other potential, though unexplored, reason why student relationships were so valued among the interviewed NECMO teachers was the age and experience of the teachers. The majority of the teachers interviewed did not have children of their own, nor more than ten years of teaching experience overall, placing them relatively early in their careers. It can be hypothesized that their time and energy was spent on these teacher-student relationships in greater amounts than may be the case later on in their careers since they may have had more time that was not devoted to families in comparison to their older peers with children at home. This was evident in the ways in which teachers described their student relationships as noted in the case studies and in the number of extracurricular leadership roles that the majority of the teachers in the study held, roles that gave them additional opportunities to continue to build relationships outside of the classroom with students.

### **Sense of efficacy with regards to student academic performance**

Seven of the nine teachers interviewed discussed the importance that their feeling of success with students' academic performance had on their own interest in continuing to teach at the school. For example, teachers at Angel College Prep explained that they felt effective based on their students' test scores and other achievement data (Chapter 4), and one teacher at Parker cited her students' passing rates on the state math exam with pride (Lacy, Chapter 6). In another example from Lion College Prep, teachers described seeing former students' "growth from 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade" that were "building a life...meaning a college degree" (Stacy, Chapter 5) and teaching siblings of "ex-students that graduated that are now in college" (Lee, Chapter 5). As Angel teacher Gabrielle put it, "the [student achievement] data supports that we are doing something right", or as Steve, another Angel teachers stated, "I typically measure my effectiveness around quantitative data with my students, especially the longitudinal [data]."

I did find some differences between the schools on this issue. In two schools, Angel and Lion, all teachers ranked student achievement as an important factor in their decision-making, at Parker only one teacher noted this theme. Based on the teachers' comments within the case studies in the prior chapters it is clear that student academic performance provided a means for teachers to measure their own performance. The data on each teacher that I received in all schools showed achievement to be above state averages, though I cannot say what student growth looked like. (See Table 14 for student performance data by teacher). This is an important piece of potential learning in that the interviewed teachers at Angel and Lion appear to have high levels of self-efficacy, which will be discussed in the policy and research implications later in this chapter.

There were seven teachers in the study who taught tested subject areas the Texas STAAR exam to be administered (Gabrielle taught Spanish, and Lee taught PE). Of these

seven, two of them taught special education with a group of students across multiple grade levels making specific achievement on the state exam challenging to determine. However, based on public testing data available on the TEA website, of the five teachers who did teach state tested exams all of their students outscored the state passing rate and their district's passing rate in both 2016 and 2017 except in 8<sup>th</sup> grade science where this standard was missed by one point and with one exception on the district side (See Table 14 for student performance data by teacher). These teachers' students were outperforming all students in the state, not just students from minority and/or low-income backgrounds, and also usually outperforming their peers in their own network.

Table 14: NECMO Stayer Student Achievement by teacher

| <u>Teacher</u> | <u>School</u>      | <u>Grade &amp; Content Area</u> | <u>Passing Rate (2016/2017)</u> | <u>District Passing Rate (16/17)</u> | <u>State Passing Rate (16/17)</u> |
|----------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Mary           | Angel College Prep | 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade English   | -/88%                           | 93%/ 93%                             | 86%/ 87%                          |
| Eve            | Lion College Prep  | 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade English   | 95%/ 91%                        | 86%/90%                              | 86%/ 87%                          |
| Libby          | Parker Academy     | 6 <sup>th</sup> Grade English   | 88%/ 83%                        | 74%/ 75%                             | 69%/ 69%                          |
| Jenny          | Parker Academy     | 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Science   | 71%/ 74%                        | 75%/68%                              | 76%/ 75%                          |
| Lacy           | Parker Academy     | 8 <sup>th</sup> grade Math      | 93%/90%                         | 89%/84%                              | 85%/ 82%                          |

*Source: Texas Education Agency, 2016-2017 TAPR Report*

### **Opportunity to lead and support colleagues**

Six of the nine teachers interviewed, including all of the teachers at Angel College Prep and at Parker Academy, felt that the opportunity to lead and support colleagues influenced their meaning making as they decided whether to remain with their school or

not. All of the teachers at Angel College Preparatory valued the opportunity to lead and engage with their colleagues and all three of these teachers held leadership roles at their school that allowed them to do just that. Similarly, at Parker Academy all three teachers also valued the opportunity to lead their peers on campus with two of the three teachers taking on leadership roles. The Angel and Parker teachers' comments on the topic in the previous chapters both include sentiments around the importance of helping out colleagues who are new and lending the expertise built up over their experiences at the school with others in formal and informal ways.

For example, all five teachers with formal paid coaching or leadership roles such as grade team leader or content leader for the network said that they felt a responsibility to both their teaching peers and ultimately their students to lead cohesive meetings and provide resources that would help other teachers. In addition to this formal work they also saw themselves as a person that new teachers could go to for advice and assistance and they all noted that having a person like that was important for teachers at their school and for the performance of the school itself.

None of the teacher stayers at Lion College prep explicitly noted the chance to take on leadership roles in their meaning making process. This was the only theme in the study with unanimous agreement of teachers from two schools in the case study and no agreement from teachers at the other school. The absence of the Lion College Prep teachers in this category is worth noting as NECMO leaders at Eagle (Antonia, Chapter 4) and Queen (Jane, Chapter 5) have debated whether providing or in some cases assigning leadership roles to "teacher stayers" is a positive or negative when considering the retention of these longer tenured teachers. Given the difference between the lack of formal leadership roles held by the interviewed teacher stayers at Lion vs. the enthusiastic engagement from teachers at Angel and Parker, this is a topic worth future consideration and research.

### **Commute to school a factor for teachers at each network**

In a theme with very little prior literature, six of the nine teachers interviewed noted that the length and/ or challenges of their daily commute were a factor in their decision-making process as to return to their school or not. All three teachers at Parker Academy noted that they had considered moving to another school due to their commute, had considered that a strong reason to remain at their school, or had noted it as a detracting factor that was overcome in their mind by other more important factors. Two teachers at Lion College Prep both considered the long commute to their school a deterrent but chose to remain on with the school, and Steve at Angel College Prep also noted that his lack of commute was one of his top three reasons to remain working at the school. I did not anticipate this being a theme that would emerge from this research as it was not something that I had personally encountered as a challenge as a teacher myself. There has been little written about it in the research literature. However, given its emergence it may be worth considering as a viable factor in hiring teachers in order to influence teacher retention down the road. This concept will be discussed in the policy recommendations section of this chapter.

### **Key for some teachers: Consistency of grade level and content placement**

Knowledge of one's grade level and assignment was mentioned by all three Parker Academy teachers and was explicitly noted by Lacy at Parker Academy as a key factor that might drive her to leave. She had reason to note this after having her teaching role adjusted and then readjusted at the end of each school year for the past three years. This was not the experience of the other teachers in the study who have all taught the same grade and subject for their entire time at their school (e.g. 5-8<sup>th</sup> grade physical education). The importance of

communicating future placements with teachers is noted in the policy recommendations section of this chapter.

### **Summary of Cross Case Themes- All Networks- Perceived Influence of NECMO based Teacher Retention Initiatives**

The second research question in this study is: *How do teachers make sense of district level NECMO retention initiatives in their decision to stay teaching at their school?* This portion of the analysis focuses on teachers' perceptions of the influence of initiatives undertaken through each NECMO's central office administrative team to increase teacher retention within the charter school network on teachers' meaning making process when deciding to remain with their school or to leave. District teacher retention initiatives and practices introduced by the various NECMO central leadership teams included, the introduction of Teacher Career Pathway (TCP) systems (Angel, Lion), shortening the length of the school day (Lion) and increasing length of summer vacation (Lion), stipends for early signing of annual contracts (Parker), salary increases (Lion, Parker), child care (Lion), direct engagement from central office leaders with teachers, e.g. town hall meetings, one on one coffees (Angel, Lion), and bringing dogs to campus (Lion). Overall two centralized teacher retention initiatives did receive mention from six of the nine teachers in the study; salary and engagement with central office team members. Teacher Career Pathways were mentioned by 3 of the 6 teachers in the study who experienced the program at their school.

### **Teacher Career Pathways**

Lion College Prep and Angel College Prep both participate in their network's TCP programs, initiatives designed to provide teachers with additional rewards (bonus pay, professional development) and recognition based on their placement on a continuum that

they can move up on over time. The TCP was a factor that came up for one teacher at Angel and two teachers at Lion. (Parker Academy does not have a TCP program). These three teachers were strong supporters of the TCP programs at their schools and noted the program as one of their top three factors in their meaning making process. However the other three teachers at the Angel and Lion schools explicitly dismissed the respective programs in their network as something that they were aware of but that did not make a strong impact on their intentions to return to their school the following year (See Chapters 4 and 5). Given the amount of time and energy that these two NECMOs are putting into their TCP programs and the sharp divide among the teachers in this study on each program's importance in their retention decision it is recommended that a broader study is undertaken to determine the importance of TCP programs to teacher stayers' and all teachers' retention meaning making. This recommendation will be discussed in detail in the policy section of this chapter.

### **Teacher salary**

Teacher salary was mentioned as a key decision factor for six of the nine teachers in the study, including all of the teachers at Parker Academy, two teachers at Lion College Prep, and one teacher at Angel College Prep. Salary was *not* the *most* important factor for any teacher in the study but was noted as a top three factor for three of the teachers in the study, two of them at Lion College prep where salary was combined with the teacher career pathway and one at Parker Academy. The general premise among interviewees who cited salary as a key part of their meaning making process was that they wanted to be sure they were being paid a competitive salary in comparison to their peers in traditional public schools. All teachers at Parker noted that they had received a pay raise in a previous year that brought their pay equal to or above the local traditional public school district.

### **Direct engagement from central office leaders with teachers matters to some teacher stayers**

At Angel College Prep in the Eagle Network and at Lion College Prep in the Queen network central office leaders attempted to increase teacher retention by holding specific school wide meetings where the leaders from the NECMO would come to the school to respond to questions from teachers in large group town hall settings (Angel) or in individual meetings with teachers (Lion) Six of the nine teachers interviewed noted that they appreciated the work of central office leaders to seek out their opinions via individual face-to-face meetings, town hall meetings where all teachers met with a district leader after school, teacher councils, or staff surveys. For these six teachers engagement from the central office team meant that leaders were listening and at times showing their willingness to take action on teacher recommendations based on new district level policy. None of the teachers who cited this factor however noted central office engagement as part of their top three decision factors when deciding to stay or leave their school and teachers remained divided within Eagle College Prep and Parker academy as to the effectiveness of their meetings with district leaders. Some teachers at both schools felt like meeting with district leaders did not lead to changes in their day to day lives at school. Teachers at Lion College Prep believed that there was a high level of listening and action coming out of the Queen central administrative team. They cited the evidence of teachers' advocacy for a shorter day and the district leadership's granting of this request.

### **CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS—EAGLE & QUEEN NETWORKS**

After analyzing the results of the teacher interviews it also became clear that in addition to an analysis of the trends across each of the three schools that a deeper analysis of the similarities in teacher decision making themes at the Queen and Eagle networks might be helpful to future researchers. When Parker Academy was removed from the



interview data strong patterns emerged aligning the Lion College Prep and Angel College Prep schools, including the additional themes of teacher burnout (6/6 teachers) and belief in the school's mission (6/6).

Although Parker is certainly a NECMO as noted previously given its mission statement of preparing students for higher education from underserved communities, the school does not seem as "NECMO like" as the Queen and Eagle schools in a number of ways, the evidence of which bore out in the teacher interviews. For example, none of the teachers from Parker Academy noted a challenge in the number of hours that they were working, a recurring criticism at NECMO schools. Taylor's student population also had fewer students from low-income backgrounds than the Eagle and Queen schools (91% and 90% respectively vs. 53%)<sup>37</sup>

Another example of Parker differing from other NECMOs in general and therefore also from Lion and Angel was the teachers' lack of discussion during interviews on the school's mission and the value that it held for them. Nearly all of the teachers at Lion and Angel came to work at the schools and continued to work at their school in part due to their commitment to their school's respective missions. At Parker none of the teachers mentioned the mission of their school in their interviews.

An additional example of the differences between the Eagle and Queen network schools in the study and the Taylor school was in how the teachers actually talked about their students and the achievement of their students. In the Queen and Lion schools each teacher interviewed expressed passion around the achievement of their students and noted the academic achievements of their students as one of the factors pushing them to remain

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<sup>37</sup> TEA TAPR Report 2016-2017

teaching at their school. Only one teacher at Parker Academy mentioned student achievement.

I bring these differences up because the inclusion of the responses from Parker Academy's teachers changes the overall themes of the teacher responses in this study. To put this into perspective if Parker Academy in the Taylor network had not been a part of this study, the Lion College Prep and Angel College Prep teachers would have had 100% teacher alignment with six of the six teachers being interviewed agreeing on the inclusion of five themes and 4/6 agreeing on two more. The common themes between Lion and Angel were: 1. Student relationships over time (6/6), 2. Student Academic performance (6/6), 3. Teacher colleagues (6/6), 4. Belief in the school's mission (6/6), 5. Long hours lead to burn out (6/6), 6. Principal effectiveness and culture building capacity (4/6, and 7. Relationship with teacher manager (4/6). With Parker included in the study the teachers interviewed unanimously agreed on only one theme's importance; teacher colleagues.

#### **CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS—INDIVIDUAL TEACHER MEANING MAKING**

The themes noted in the previous sections show patterns in teacher meaning making and the most common factors that impacted teachers' meaning processes across the study. For the teachers in the study it was clear that the patterns within and across the school sites represented the majority of the ways that teachers made meaning within their retention decision. However, there were some teachers' whose meaning making processes differed from the patterns within the group and who prioritized a theme outside of the core findings from the study as most important to them. Similarly, some teachers identified with common themes in the study as important to their meaning making processes but were extremely focused on one of these themes above others. These explicit biases that teachers described

towards a certain factor in their meaning making process are worth noting even if the number of teachers mentioning them does not constitute a majority perspective.

One teacher perspective that stood out was Lion College Prep English teacher Eve's perspective on curriculum. For her the ability to use the curriculum she has worked hard to create and master was extremely critical. She was extremely passionate about this issue, so much so that despite the lack of other teachers discussing this theme, the importance of teacher created curriculum creating a retention challenge should not be overlooked. It seemed to me that the amount of time that Eve had spent in creating the curriculum had led her to a binary decision point. If she was permitted by her principal to continue to use the curriculum (and thus teach the same grade), then she would stay on at the school, but if she were asked to create new curriculum she would likely leave given the stress that the initial curriculum creation had caused her. A teacher's decision hinging on one core factor like curriculum is worth considering even if other teachers did not cite the same factor as most important to them.

Another factor that stood out for its intensity even though it was also noted by six of the teachers was the challenge of working long hours at Angel and Lion College Prep. Teachers at these schools not only noted the long hours and burnout as a factor, but when they discussed this issue they were passionate and frustrated making comments like, "You cannot work here and have kids" (Chapter 4). When this topic came up in interviews the teachers who mentioned it were visibly agitated as it seemed that they very much wanted to teach for long periods of time at their schools but were not sure how they would be able to do so given the challenges that they faced on a daily basis and the amount of time they stayed at school. No factor seemed as frustrating to teachers to me as this one.

One factor that also received a passionate description by teachers was the importance of improving their teaching practice. Two of the teachers at the Angel noted

that one of the reasons that they stayed on at the school was that they thought that working there gave them the best chance at getting better at teaching. In other words, if they were to leave the school they would be dubious of receiving similar feedback and professional training opportunities elsewhere. This stood out to me as each of the respondents made it clear that the school's administrative team had been providing consistent feedback and that this feedback mattered to them. This also stood out to me because in my experience this is not necessarily a common sentiment among teachers at all schools. The fact that the teachers were adamant that receiving feedback on their performance was key to their decision to stay on at their school deeply resonated with me because to me it highlighted their passion for improving their students' academic achievement.

#### **ALIGNING FINDINGS WITH RESEARCH & FRAMEWORKS**

There were six teacher-retention meaning-making themes that teachers in this study identified across all three case studies that aligned to the existing literature. These themes were; 1. School working conditions and culture established by the school principal, 2. The collegial relationships between teachers as a component of one's working conditions, 3. A shared sense of mission among teachers, 4. Teacher efficacy leading to retention, 5. The negative impact of the long hours worked, and 6. The impact of salary.

There were also two components of existing literature relating to NECMO teacher retention that were not clearly aligned to the findings within this research; teacher demographics leading to teacher attrition and teachers' college selectivity.

#### **Literature on working conditions—school culture established by the principal**

As noted in Chapter Two, the school principal can have the ability to influence student achievement (Louis & Dretzke, 2010; Eberts & Stone, 1988) as well as the

retention of teachers (Ingersoll 2001a, 2001b; Boyd et al., 2011). This study corroborated this research as all of the teachers at Lion College Prep and to a lesser extent Parker Academy pointed to specific actions taken by the school principal as important to their personal decision to remain in a teaching role at the school. Teachers at Angel College Prep did not point explicitly to the principal himself as the cause of their wanting to remain at the school (like teachers did at Lion College Prep), but they did point to the school culture which they attributed to the principal as being an important part of their decision making.

It was clear in comments from teachers across all three case study sites that they had a high level of trust in their administration, a critical factor in long term teacher retention (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009), as well as a strong belief in the competency of their principal's ability (Torres, 2016), to help them to improve their instruction over time. This was even true at Eagle and Parker despite those schools having experienced a churn of school leaders before each current leader had arrived the previous year. Teachers also believed that their principal had a high level of personal regard for them, particularly at Lion College Prep as evidenced by the positive principal-teacher relationships that each interviewed teacher and the principal herself pointed towards as evidence of a strong campus culture. These relationships echoed Torres' theory of relational trust which espoused, "integrity, respect, competence and personal regard" (2016), as well as Elmore's theory of reciprocity (2008), particularly in regards to teacher comments on having the proper materials and support from their manager which was heard in interviews with teachers across all three schools in this study.

### **Literature on working conditions- collegial relationships**

Collegial relationships were the only unanimous theme that influenced teacher meaning making across all nine teachers in the study. Every teacher interviewed cited their

teaching peers and the relationship with them as a key part of their decision to remain teaching with their school. This sentiment is aligned to existing literature on teacher retention at traditional public schools where researchers have noted that teacher colleague relationships contribute to teachers' satisfaction with their working environment and ultimately to their retention (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2011). A key component of these relationships that lead to a desire to remain on with a school is trust between teachers, or "relational trust" (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). This trust was present in teachers' comments across all schools in the study. For example teachers referenced "a good feeling here...no competition between teachers" (Lacy, Chapter 6), and "interaction with colleagues is very important" (Mary, Chapter 4). Teachers in this study also cited a strong level of collegiality with one another, a trend that has been present in prior research. The Johnson study noted that teachers were more likely to stay due to "productive working relationships with their colleagues" (p. 25). The teachers in this study not only appeared to have productive working relationships, but were also friends both in and outside of work. Teachers noted that "my core group of friends are all teachers at Angel" (Mary, Chapter 4), and "a couple of my good friends are on my grade level team" (Stacy, Chapter 5).

There are a few potential reasons why this trust may develop among these NECMO teaching teams. One, the teachers really do spend a lot of time together outside of school (Mary, Chapter 4; Stacy, Chapter 5), leading to a greater acceleration of trust than may be found at a traditional school where teachers do not have the number of hours logged together outside of school. Two, given the high teacher turnover at NECMOs it is possible that teachers who do stay for an extended period of time develop greater bonds than they might at a traditional public school given the potential attrition taking place around them. In other words, "we are in this together for the long haul approach." Three, the mission

from the schools may push teachers to be less shy with one another and more forthcoming in an interest to achieve the common and clear goals of the academic program. These reasons are speculative at this point and may merit future research.

### **Literature on mission**

Research has shown that some teachers elect to teach at high poverty schools such as two of the three NECMOs in this study (Lion College Prep and Angel College Prep, each with 90%+ students from low income backgrounds). Teachers at these schools generally want to work with that specific population of students and want those students to achieve at high levels (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Cochran-Smith et al., 2012) and express a desire for a sense of social justice for their students (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012). The mission of these schools to serve this demographic was something that attracted these teachers.

Both of these themes were apparent in comments from teachers at Angel College Prep and Lion College Prep but as noted earlier, not from teachers at Parker Academy where teachers were not as driven by the school's mission when considering returning to the school. At Angel and Lion multiple teacher interviews included comments that the teachers were focused on the school's mission of sending student to and through college as well as comments on how this mission defined social justice for these students and their families (Chapters 4 and 5).

### **Literature connecting teacher efficacy to teacher retention**

The sense of teacher efficacy discovered among teacher stayers in this study aligns to previous research linking perceived teacher efficacy to increased teacher retention. Though I do not have data about the actual efficacy of teachers here, the teachers clearly

said that their sense of achievement with respect to their students was important to their decision to stay.

There are multiple examples of research on teacher efficacy with many of these studies linking teacher efficacy to the retention of student teachers about to enter the field (Moulding, Stewart, & Dunmeyer, 2014; Zee & Koomen, 2016; Redman, 2015) and a few studies on veteran teachers' efficacy tied to retention (Hughes, 2012; McKinney, Berry, Dickerson, & Campbell-Whately, 2007). Some of these studies on new teachers use survey tools to measure teachers' sense of efficacy before engaging in the classroom and then comparing the results of students to the teachers' self-assessed efficacy levels. One such study measured grit among new teachers on the front end and found that teachers with a higher "grit score", which could be related to efficacy, produced greater student achievement results and were more likely to remain in the classroom (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014). In a recent meta-analysis of teacher self-efficacy, researchers Zee and Koomen found that low levels of self-efficacy were aligned to a departure from education (Klassen & Chiu, 2011; Tsouloupas et al., 2010), and that higher levels of teacher efficacy led to higher job satisfaction (Canrinus et al., 2012) but not necessarily retention. Some research has also shown that effective teachers (as measured by their student's test scores) are more likely to remain in the classroom than those teachers whose students exhibit lower test scores (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005).

### **Literature on long hours and burnout**

A number of studies on NECMOs have highlighted the burnout (Lake, Dusseault, Bowen, Demeritt, & Hill, 2010; Lack, 2009) and long hours (Torres, 2016) teachers have often experienced working in NECMOs and how these factors can lead to teacher attrition. This study corroborated those findings, at least for the six teachers working at Lion College



Prep and Angel College Prep the two schools in the study with the highest levels of student poverty. All six teachers at these schools described the long hours as problematic, and outside of Lee the physical education teacher at Angel, many were wrestling with their own ability to stay in their role for the duration of their career. Some researchers have posited that the entire NECMO model is flawed due to the lack of teacher retention at NECMO schools due to ‘burnout’ and thus their lack of sustainability (Lack, 2009). However, it seems that for the teachers in this study, that the stayers are searching for ways to remain with their school and make the work manageable rather than find ways to leave. All six of the teachers noting that long hours were a negative factor in their decision-making process on whether to remain with their school noted that they would be returning to their classroom for the 2018-2019 school year.

### **Literature on salary**

Literature on the topic has highlighted salary as one of the most critical factors for teachers as they consider leaving their classroom and/ or the teaching profession in general (Borman & Dowling, 2006). An increase in salary two years prior to this study was acknowledged by each of the three teachers at Parker as a key part of their decision to remain with the organization, a sentiment that aligns to prior research on additional pay leading to additional teacher tenure (Murnane, Singer, Willet, Kemple, & Olsen, 1991; Dolton & Ven de Klaauw, 1995, 1999). Two teachers at Lion College Prep and one teacher at Angel College Prep also believed that their increased income due to current or potential placement in a higher earning tier on their organizations respective TCP was a significant part of their meaning making on remaining with their school. This logic is aligned to previous research where a considerable increase in salary of greater than \$1,000 (Borman & Dowling, 2006) and greater than 20% (Hanushek, 2004), would lead to teachers

remaining with urban schools for longer periods of time, since TCP raises were greater than 20% per teachers' descriptions.

## **FINDINGS NEW TO THE RESEARCH LITERATURE**

The following two findings mattered to the teacher stayers in this study and have not been extensively connected to teacher retention findings in prior research. Research has been done in these areas but I was able to find few articles connecting each of these topics with teacher retention outcomes. 1. Teacher-student relationships including with prior students, 2. Quality of a teacher's direct manager. There were also three secondary themes that were not as highly aligned as the first three, which were also not represented in the literature on teacher retention. These themes were: the chance to lead and support teacher colleagues, direct contact and communication with central office leaders (e.g. superintendent, CEO), and the teachers' commute to school.

### **Literature on present and long-term teacher-student relationships and teacher retention**

In a review of the literature I did not encounter articles that connected student-teacher relationships to retention, although there were articles on the importance of such relationships for student academic performance (Wang, Selman, Sishion, & Stormshak, 2010), and improvements in school climate (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). This is a significant finding because most current administrative practices to improve teacher retention are focused on additional prestige and promotion such as the TCP, or additional salary opportunities through a TCP or stipends.

### **Literature on teacher relational trust with manager, e.g. assistant principal**

The work of building teacher instructional capacity, creating a relationship of relational trust (Torres, 2016), and reciprocity (Elmore, 2008), often falls to the assistant principal at the individual teacher relationship level. There is little prior research on the teacher- assistant principal relationship in general and particularly at NECMOs. At the NECMOs in this study however, it was very clear that assistant principals were expected to observe teachers regularly and that teachers expected their manager or the assistant principal assigned to manage them to be “there for us” (Lacy, Chapter 6). Assuming that relationship was in place teachers strongly weighted the value of their direct manager in their decision to return to their teaching role.

### **Additional findings new to the literature**

Three other findings that are relatively unknown in the literature were the effect of interactions with district leadership on teacher retention meaning making, the chance to lead colleagues, and the impact of teachers’ commute to work on their decision to remain in the classroom. I found little research on NECMO leadership engaging with staff members and how this impacted employee morale and/ or tenure. I also did not discover research on the ways that teacher leadership opportunities impact tenure at NECMOs. There were a few studies on this topic for traditional public schools which showed no alignment to retention (Harper, 2015), or small alignment between increased responsibilities while in the teacher role with increased teacher retention (Allen, 2018), or the likelihood of moving into administration at a later time (Pyatiforsky, Heneman, Steele, & Finster, 2015). There was also one study on the factors that influenced teacher selection of schools within a geographic market including the length of commute to the school

(Hines & Mathis, 2007), but no studies including commute time that focused on teacher's choices to remain at their school.

## **RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS**

There are several implications from this study for research. One key area of research would be the link between teacher efficacy, teacher retention and student performance at NECMOs. This is because an understanding of why teachers with high levels of self efficacy and student achievement choose to remain at NECMOs could lead to the retention of these high performing teachers at these schools and thus consistent learning for the students in these schools. This matters at NECMOs because oftentimes teachers at these schools are teaching in a school where the majority of the students are from low-income backgrounds, an environment that can bring down teacher morale and efficacy (McKinney, Berry, Dickerson, & Campbell-Whately, 2007).

Another area from this study that merits further research is the gap between administrator and teacher valuation of teacher retention initiatives. Principals in this study had strong opinions about the importance of their district and school-based teacher retention initiatives. Each of the three principals interviewed believed that their retention efforts were not only making a difference but were making the difference for teachers. For example, principals at Lion College Prep, Angel College Prep, and Parker academy all thought that their respective staff celebrations, teacher career pathway, and early incentive pay for notification of a return were a key cause of high levels of teacher retention. However, none of these programs merited mention from the majority of teachers interviewed at their schools. The principals themselves were all mentioned as being a key part of teachers' decisions by every teacher interviewed in the Taylor and Queen networks and by one teacher in the Eagle network, but not for the retention initiatives the led or

supported. Instead they were mentioned for doing their core work well; establishing culture and supporting teachers through effective discipline and instructional improvement practices.

An additional research recommendation coming out of this study is for policy researchers to analyze teachers' interest in and teacher retention motivations stemming from the TCP programs in more detail. District administrators believed that these programs were making a difference in teacher retention rates, yet the teachers in this study remained divided on the importance of this type of program with only half of the study participants noting the pathway as important in their decision-making. The participants who cited the teacher career pathway as one of their core decision factors felt very strongly about the importance of this program having a positive impact on their earning potential as well as their career trajectory. This is exciting because this is one of the key ideas of these pathways; engaging teachers on where they can move in their career with the NECMO. A study with a larger sample size and clear qualitative questions would provide needed clarity on the importance of this program in teachers' meaning making around returning to their school to teach another year.

It would also be interesting to know teachers interest in coaching and/ or supporting their peers. This was a topic that teachers were divided on within this study as some teachers highly valued being a peer coach or leading a department and others did not. Research on this topic could help school leaders determine what coaching and leadership options to offer teacher stayers that lead to retention rather than departure.

An additional recommendation for further research is for researchers to analyze data on teacher retention in comparison to commute time. This could be particularly interesting at charter schools where students themselves are often arriving from a more varied geography than a traditional public school. A regression showing correlations

between the number of years a teacher has remained at their school in comparison to drive time may help school administrators determine how far away teachers may be willing to travel to the school while still having a longer career in the building.

The final research recommendation I have would be for education researchers to more deeply understand the role of the assistant principal or direct teacher manager as an instructional leader and this person's connection to teacher retention. Based on the comments from teachers in this study the ability for assistant principals or teacher managers to coach and support teachers is critical for teachers to remain in their role. A quantitative study evaluating the level of importance that teachers placed on their direct manager (likely an assistant principal), versus their school principal could be very compelling and possibly further illuminate the role of teacher managers on retention and student academic performance. Researchers could review teachers' belief in whether they would go to their principal or their teacher manager when considering whom to go to for support in pursuit of student academic performance or for insights into whether or not to remain on teaching for another year.

## **POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Teacher burnout remains a challenge at NECMOs**

As noted in chapter two there have been multiple findings of teacher burnout among teachers at NECMOs leading to increased teacher attrition at these schools. After reviewing the findings from this study I concur that the NECMO teachers within this study face long hours and the potential for burnout on a regular basis. This is not a problem that is dissipating as the demands of working with students in poverty and the level of accountability and expectation for student achievement results will likely continue at each NECMO particularly at Eagle and Queen where each of the teachers who cited burn out

currently work. NECMO School system leaders and principals should assume that the majority of teachers are facing long hours and a feeling of burnout and use this lens when considering new initiatives or adjusting current practices. When district level initiatives change to reduce workload such as a shorter school day across the Queen network teachers were clearly pleased (Chapter 5), when changes were proposed or actually made such as changing a teacher's manager at Angel (Chapter 4), or moving a teacher to a new grade level at Parker (Chapter 6), teachers were more likely to grow frustrated possibly leading to departure.

### **School Principals should encourage teacher peer relationships**

Nine of the nine teachers interviewed in this study noted the importance of the relationships they had with their peers. Principals could give teachers the chance to determine these critical peers by having teachers interview their future colleagues and setting interview times after school so that teachers can attend, or hold interviews in the middle of the day and provide teachers a substitute teacher so that they may attend. School leaders should also provide, time, space and resources that help teachers deepen relationships with one another. Initiatives could include common planning time within school or even an after work happy hour sponsored by the PTO. Examples in this study of these practices are the teacher dinners hosted by teachers at Angel College Prep and by the principal at Lion College Prep. School leaders should also avoid breaking up teaching teams and provide clarity as early and often as possible on any changes to a teaching team or teachers' roles on a team.

### **School District Leaders should increase teacher manager capacity**

School systems leaders should devote resources and time to training teacher/middle managers such as assistant principals. These training may involve instructional coaching techniques to improve managers' ability to coach teachers toward instructional improvement. A good place to start would be to find content relating to building capacity for managers around Torres' 4 components of relational trust; integrity, respect, competence and personal regard. School leaders should also determine manager assignments early and not move teachers from under managers that teachers work with well given the strong opinions that teachers in this study had about their direct manager.

### **Principals should link teachers to their previous students who are still on campus**

One way of doing this would be to implement a specific program for teachers to work with former students on their college process, e.g. helping with essays, virtual tours, and discussing options. This needs to be done in a way that does not create additional tasks for a teacher without removing something in return. Principals could also create opportunities for former students to visit their prior teachers' classrooms and continue to build on the relationships formed in the classroom. Only when teachers are stayers for a duration of time are rewards like this possible, but these are likely some of the best experiences for stayer teachers to have at their school and would likely facilitate retention.

### **District leaders should evaluate commute time as a retention factor**

Given the emergence of commute time as a factor in this study school districts should analyze correlations between the distance teachers are traveling to school and the duration of teachers. Districts could execute a regression analysis on the distances teachers drive from their home to school and how that number correlates to teacher departures. If data shows a high correlation school districts may want to consider methods of recruiting



teachers within a certain radius of the school in order to potentially reduce future attrition due to the challenges of teaching and completing a longer commute.

## **SUMMARY**

In summary, I hope that this study will offer a contribution to the existing literature on teacher retention at NECMOs and perhaps inspire other researchers to take a closer look at the meaning making taking place within these unique American schools. It is clear that teacher stayers at these schools have strong opinions about the work of teaching and the performance of their students. Researchers should match this passion with additional research. In addition to the literature I hope that the findings in this study will lead school system leaders and principals to make adjustments to existing policies or to create new policies that will lead to an increase in teacher retention in NECMOs. Improving the work of schools in ways that positively impacts students through policy research is the ideal, if we can do this while also retaining the adults we will be on track for a better schooling system populated by teacher stayers who will do right by their students.

## Appendices

**HIDDEN TEXT: NOTE: IF YOU HAVE MORE THAN ONE APPENDIX YOU CAN USE THE HEADING 2,H2 STYLE AND LABEL EACH APPENDIX SEPARATELY, E.G., APPENDIX A, APPENDIX B, ETC. YOU COULD ALSO TITLE THIS SECTION “APPENDICES” USING THE HEADING 2, H2 STYLE, AND USE HEADING 3,H3 FOR EACH SEPARATE APPENDIX**

### APPENDIX A; SAMPLE EMAIL, CONSENT FORM, INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Hi Hailey,

Thank you for taking the time to sit down for an interview with me this week. I wanted to follow up on your offer to introduce me to Queen teachers who would be willing to be interviewed for approximately 60 minutes on their work and Queen for a study I am conducting on “Teacher Stayers” at charter schools in [local region]. I am specifically interested in their thoughts on teacher “stayers” and teacher retention. I can meet these teachers at campus or at a location of their choosing. There is no prep work, although I have attached the questions for the interview as well as the University of Texas at Austin approval letter for the study, and the study details if teachers would like to review them.

I would greatly appreciate it if you could forward this email to any teachers who have taught at your campus for at least three years and are coming back to teach during the upcoming 2017-2018 school year. Ideally these teachers would teach a tested subject area in 5-8th grade. Thank you in advance for your help. Teachers who wish to participate in the study should know that their names will not be shared and that the data from the study will be used to assist public charter schools in building district programs to retain teachers.

If it is helpful please forward this email to any teachers whom you think may be interested and meet the above criteria. Thank you, Sam

Next Steps for teachers interested in participating:

1. Call or text Sam at [956-373-7102](tel:956-373-7102) to find a time for a 60 min interview the week of 7/17 or 7/24. Friday 7/21 is a good day for interviews.

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Sam Goessling  
Ph.D. Candidate

University of Texas at Austin

Education Policy & Planning Program

[samgoessling@gmail.com](mailto:samgoessling@gmail.com)

[\(956\)-373-7102](tel:956-373-7102)

Hi Gabrielle,

My name is Sam Goessling I am doctoral student at UT Austin and also work at Eagle. I am writing to connect with you on the study that I mentioned at the town hall at Allan. I received your name from principal Cheslie as a candidate for this study given your tenure at the school.

The purpose of the study is to better understand why teachers choose to stay at charter schools like Eagle. I am looking to interview teachers who have taught for at least three years at their school and are choosing to return for a fourth year. From what I understand you are a match for these criteria. I will not be sharing your name in the study, nor with your principals, admin team, nor other Eagle leadership. You would receive a synthesis of my interviews in September and eventually (hopefully May 2018), my finished research.

You can call or text me at [956-373-7102](tel:956-373-7102) to learn more about the study. I am happy to give you some more background on my research on charter schools.

Would you be interested in participating? If you are interested in the study there are three steps to take:

1. Review the attached documents

1. The release form, 2. The teacher questions document, 3. UT letter approving study. I will ask you to sign the release form when we meet.

2. Email me a time when you could interview with me (see times below)

I will go to you and can meet you at Allan, or at a location that works well for you in Austin. A coffee shop is fine so long as it is not too loud. These dates are preferred but if they do not work, let me know.

3. Meet with me to be interviewed

This will take 60-90 minutes total.

**Times available to interview**

## Consent for Participation in Research

Title: Why are the Stayers staying with “No Excuses” Charter Management Organizations (CMOs)? A qualitative study on teacher retention at “No Excuses” CMOs

### Introduction

The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. The person performing the research will answer any of your questions. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your consent.

### Purpose of the Study

You have been asked to participate in a research study about teacher retention at college preparatory charter management organization (CPCMO) schools. The purpose of this study is to describe how teachers make meaning as they approach their decision to stay in their teaching position at CPCMO charter schools. A secondary purpose of the study is to better understand how teachers make sense of district level CPCMO retention initiatives in their decision to stay teaching at their school.

What will you be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to

Participate in one 60-75 minute interview covering your teaching background, current work, description of your schools’ culture and how you have approached decisions regarding returning to teach at your school.

The interview will be conducted at your school in your classroom or if available an alternative area

The interview will only involve yourself and the researcher.

The study will have approximately 15 participants.

Note: Your participation will be audio recorded for transcription purposes. Digital audio recordings will be deleted following transcription completion.

What are the risks involved in this study?

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, your participation will provide increased qualitative research data to the field of education particularly around education policies that directly impact teacher retention at CPCMO charter schools. Findings from the study will be shared within traditional public and public charter schools as requested helping these school districts to improve their policies in ways that may directly improve teacher retention ultimately leading to higher levels of student achievement at these schools.

Do you have to participate?

No, your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate at all or, if you start the study, you may withdraw at any time. Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect your relationship with The University of Texas at Austin (University) in anyway.

If you would like to participate please:

Sign this form.

Email or deliver in person this signed form to Sam Goessling; [samgoessling@utexas.edu](mailto:samgoessling@utexas.edu). You will receive a copy of this form.

Will there be any compensation?

You will not receive any type of payment participating in this study.

How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected if you participate in this research study?

Your privacy and the confidentiality of your data will be protected by the following measures:

The following security measures for data will be in place to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the research participants:

Participants' pseudonyms will be used for all participant names, school district names and school names.

Interviews will be audio recorded using a digital recorder which will be stored in a locked and secure area, which will be kept separate from research notes and contact information.

All audio information that includes personally identifiable information will be removed, e.g. name, school, professional titles, school district. Participants in the study will also have a pseudonym assigned to them on the transcripts from the transcription service.

A UT-approved UT Box will be used for storage of any transcript files, research notes and files.

Password protection will be used for all software files involving interview information.

Participant contact logs and crosswalk information will be kept separate from any and all other research-related materials,

Only a UT email account will be used for email correspondence on this study.

Digital labels for the audio data files of interviews will have pseudonym initials, not the initials of actual participants.

If it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review the study records, information that can be linked to you will be protected to the extent permitted by law. Your research records will not be released without your consent unless required by law or a court order. The data resulting from your participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate it with you, or with your participation in any study.

NOTE: If audio/video recordings will be made include the following statements:

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only the research team will have access to the recordings. Recordings will be kept for four months and then erased.

Whom to contact with questions about the study?

Prior, during or after your participation you can contact the researcher Sam Goessling at (956)-373-7102 or send an email to [samgoessling@utexas.edu](mailto:samgoessling@utexas.edu) for any questions or if you feel that you have been harmed.

Whom to contact with questions concerning your rights as a research participant?

For questions about your rights or any dissatisfaction with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board by phone at (512) 471-8871 or email at [orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu](mailto:orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu).



### Participation

If you agree to participate please:

Sign this form.

Email or deliver in person this signed form to Sam Goessling;  
[samgoessling@utexas.edu](mailto:samgoessling@utexas.edu). You will receive a copy of this form.

### Signature

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

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Printed Name

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Signature      Date

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, procedures, benefits, and the risks involved in this research study.

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Print Name of Person obtaining consent

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Signature of Person obtaining consent

Date

### Teacher Interview Questions

Sam Goessling

University of Texas at Austin

### Background Information

Tell me about your teaching (leadership) background.

How did you get into teaching? (What made you decide to become a teacher?)

What subjects and grade levels have you taught?

Have you worked at other schools besides this one? If so when and where?

How many years have you worked here at this school (network)?

How many years have you taught?

Where did you go to college?

How did you become certified to teach?

Are you from Austin?

### Charter School Context

Tell me more about how you came to teach at this school

What was it about this school that made you want to teach here?

How did you find out about the position here?

Where you recruited to work here, if so how?

What is most important to you about your work as a teacher?

When do you feel most effective as a teacher?

### Daily Practices & Routines

Tell me about a typical day at work; what time do you arrive and how do you start your day?

What time do you leave, how do you finish the day?

How do you engage with your colleagues? Describe these times.

How do you engage with administrators? Describe these interactions.

### Retention Decision Making

How did you decide to return to the classroom for the upcoming 2017-2018 school year, take me through your decision making process.

What factors would you say most impacted your decision making?

What is your opinion on the factors that most influence other teachers' decision to stay or leave the school team?

How do you feel about your decision to stay in the classroom at your school?

### District Level Impact

Are there any initiatives coming from the central office that have impacted your decision to stay for the 2017-2018 school year? If so what are they in order of most to least impactful?

How if at all does the teacher career pathway at your school district impact your work and decisions?

How much does salary and pay influence your daily work and decisions?

Are there any other factors that influence your daily work and decisions?

Other

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience of working here at this school?

Would you recommend teaching at this school to a friend? Why or why not?

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## APPENDIX B: CASE STUDY ANALYSIS & CROSS CASE ANALYSIS

| Case Study | A strong and dependable manager | Principal effectiveness matters | Teacher stayers believe deeply in their school's mission | Strong student relationships matter | Long hours are a NEGATIVE factor | opportunity to lead and have a positive impact on colleagues is important | Personal relationships with members of their teams. | TCP important | Salary |
|------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|---|---------------|--------|
| Eagle      | 3                               | 1                               | 3  | 3                                   | 3                                | 3   | 3   | 1             | 1      |
| Queen      | 1                               | 3                               | 3  | 3                                   | 3                                | 0   | 3   | 2             | 2      |
| Taylor     | 3                               | 3                               | 0  | 1                                   | 0                                | 3   | 3   | 0             | 3      |

| Case Study | Engagement and rec from central office | Commute | Scared to leave | Professional Growth, PD | Teacher stayers are motivated to stay by student academic performance | School Culture | Shorter summer break | Curriculum creation/change | Shorten school day | Teach the same grade/ content year to year | Parent support |
|------------|--|---------|-----------------|-------------------------|---|----------------|----------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|--|----------------|
| Eagle      | 2                                      | 1       | 2               | 3                       | 3   | 3              | 0                    | 1                          | 0                  | 0  | 0              |
| Queen      | 3                                      | 2       | 0               | 0                       | 3   | 3              | 3                    | 1                          | 2                  | 1  | 0              |
| Taylor     | 1                                      | 3       | 1               | 0                       | 1   | 0              | 0                    | 0                          | 0                  | 3  | 1              |

|  | Eagle                           | Eagle                                  | Eagle                | Lion                     | Lion           | Lion                 | Taylor         | Taylor                   | Taylor                 |
|--|---------------------------------|--|----------------------|--------------------------|----------------|----------------------|----------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>FACTOR<br/>impacting<br/>decision to<br/>stay</b> | Steve                           | Mary                                   | Gabrielle            | Stacy                    | Eve            | Lee                  | Libby          | Jenny                    | Lacy                   |
| <b>1</b>   | Student<br>relation.            | Student<br>relation.                   | Student<br>relation. | Principal/<br>Colleagues | Curriculu<br>m | Student<br>relation. | colleague<br>s | Principal                | Admin                  |
| <b>2</b>   | Principal<br>administra<br>tion | Time of<br>working                     | colleague<br>s       | Student<br>relationships | TCP/Salar<br>y | Principal            | salary         | Student<br>relationships | Student<br>achievement |
| <b>3</b>   | Colleagu<br>s                   | Colleagu<br>es                         | leadershi<br>p       | TCP/<br>Salary           | Principal      | Colleagu<br>s        | Commute        | Student<br>relation.     | Commute                |
| <b>4</b>   | Commute                         | coaching<br>and<br>helping<br>teachers | TCP                  | Summer<br>longer         | Colleague<br>s |                      |                |                          |                        |

## APPENDIX C: COLLEGES OF TEACHER PARTICIPANTS

| <u>Name</u> | <u>Region</u> | <u>Institutional Type</u> |
|-------------|---------------|---------------------------|
| Steve       | Northeast     | Private University        |
| Mary        | South         | Private University        |
| Gabrielle   | South         | Private College           |
| Stacy       | Midwest       | Private College           |
| Eve         | Southeast     | Public University         |
| Lee         | Southwest     | Public University         |
| Libby       | South         | Public University         |
| Jenny       | South         | Public University         |
| Lacy        | Southeast     | Public University         |

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